The Reading Naturalist

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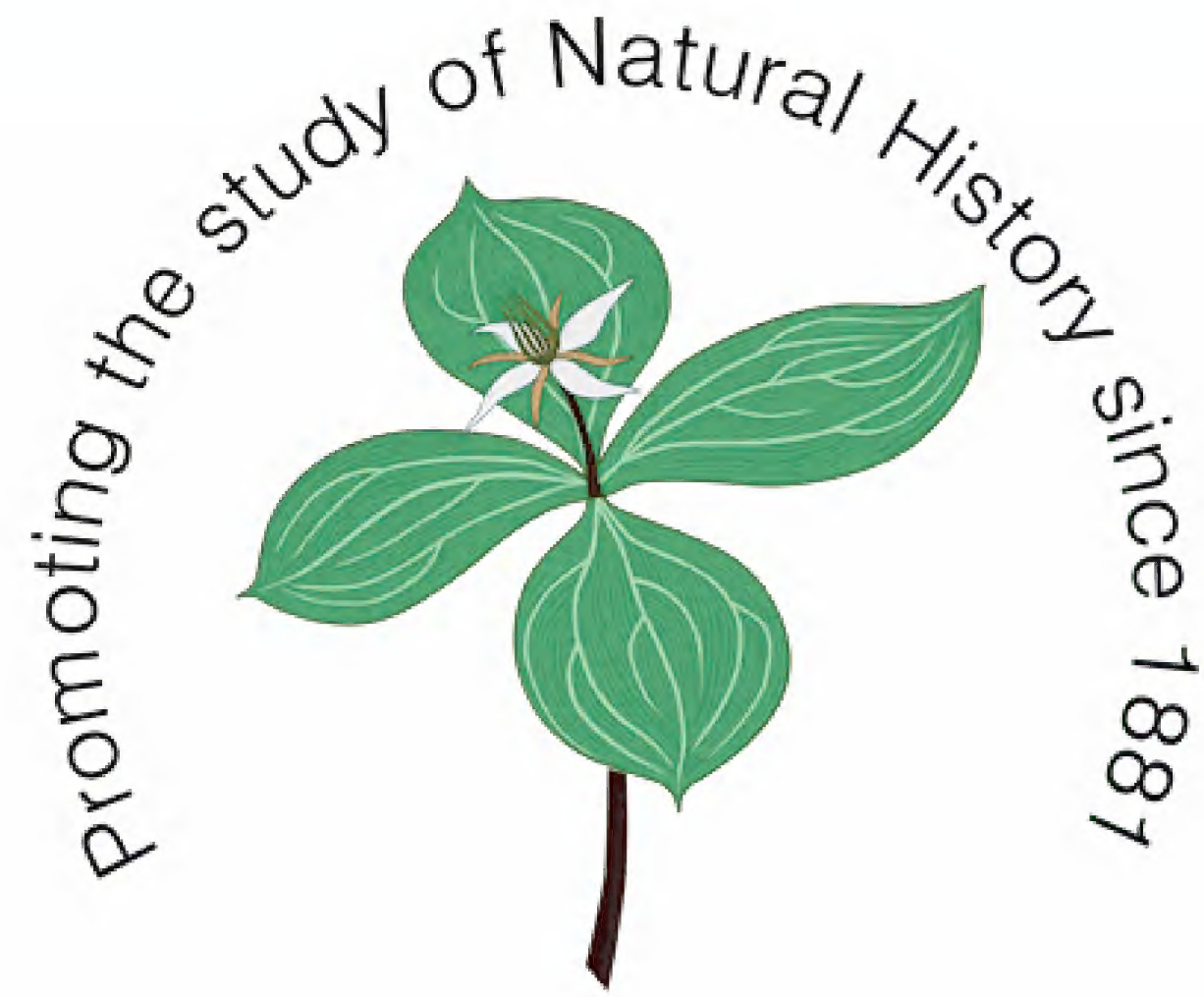

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Report for 2024

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The Journal of the

Reading and District Natural History Society

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Notes:

The content of the Reading Naturalist comes from its members. Please take part in the next one.

The recorders need your observations and you can download the recording forms for different taxa at https://rdnhs.org.uk/blog/recording/

We'd love to receive your articles of interesting walks, trips, studies and observations for the 2025 edition of The Reading Naturalist. Please email these to rdnhszoom@outlook.com or to anyone on the committee.

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Presidential Musings

By **Tricia Marcousé**

Welcome to the Reading Naturalist report for 2024, and huge apologies to all of you for the lack of a 2023 report so far. It will be completed in 2025. This makes my musings a little weird because I wanted to refer to some of the things I mused about 12 months ago, but they will make little sense until later in the year when you get the 2023 edition. I shall just say that The Muggers were back on the streets of Maiden Erlegh during the summer of 2024.

This issue of The Reading Naturalist is of a lesser quality than those of previous years, and rather cobbled together by me, greatly improved by the overseeing eagle eye of Julia Cooper, to produce something fairly quickly for 2024 rather than given the detailed care it deserves. You'll definitely notice a lack of Latin names in places and we are missing the Lepidoptera report for 2024 although expect to provide this data to you later on in the year.

Despite these problems, the Naturalist describes the wide range of walks, talks and records provided over 2024, which is all due to the amazing people on the committee, our honorary recorders and the members that give their time to research and lead the walks. Special thanks go to Jan Haseler for arranging the outdoor programme and Fiona Brown for organising the indoor talks. Rachel Woolnough has sorted out membership issues as well as running the photographic competition and getting the photos in for the Naturalist. Our finances remain solvent with Ian Duddle, including finding a new bank account without ridiculous charges, and Katie Jenks who keeps our discussions in order as well as starting a new Wild Tilehurst group that has a wide membership and will introduce more people to the joys of the natural environment. We'd all be scrabbling about looking for printed programmes or searching the website without Rob Stallard's monthly newsletter keeping us abreast of RDNHS and other conservation activities in our area, interspersed with wonderful photographs. Finally, a big thank you to Ailsa Claybourn who not only gives us a monthly update about birds at Moor Copse, summarised in this Naturalist, but who stepped in at very short notice to plug a gap at the beginning of the indoor programme in October.

A huge thank you to Ken White who has edited the Reading Naturalist over the last 8 years and gave us reports that that not only contained all the technical content we have come to expect but was beautifully illustrated as well. He and Sarah are now in Dumfries and Galloway and heavily involved in recording species over a huge area that has limited numbers of naturalists to produce and manage the datasets.

We seek a new editor for the Naturalist for 2025 and the future, and also new people to take part in running the society, leading our field excursions and Wednesday walks or perhaps initiating new activities. Please think about contributing so that we can retain our current level of activities for members; you've got all of our contact details on the printed programme.

In addition to the normal delivery of walks and talks to the members, 2024 was a big year for RDNHS members' involvement in strategic developments for biodiversity across Berkshire. The Nature Recovery Strategy for Berkshire will be the guiding document for management, development and funding on biodiversity issues in the future. The development process had specialist committees working on important species, protection of key habitats and landowner groups with several of our members giving their knowledge, advice and opinions. Other members took part in public meetings

and discussion groups or commented on the draft proposals. We expect the final document to be available in the summer of 2025.

The second long term project for the area is the Woodmeadows project at Sulham Estate where 130 hectares of agricultural land are being transformed into a mosaic of different habitats including hay meadows, pasture and new hedgerows to link up existing woodland. The area will be farmed, but at a far lower intensity and without adding additional nutrients. Developers will be able to purchase Biodiversity Units at this site to meet their planning requirement to show 10% Biodiversity Net Gain on their development land. Members of RDNHS are helping with the monitoring requirements for this important project.

Back to the present. This was an unusual year for urban wildlife in the Reading area with many sightings (or hearings) of ravens across the town, a buzzard drinking from my neighbour's pond and nesting in Maiden Erlegh, kingfisher seen fishing in the Holy Brook behind the library, otter in the Kennet by Huntley and Palmers and a new heronry getting established on the island in Maiden Erlegh lake to the horror of all those living nearby with goldfish in their garden ponds.

There was good news about hedgehogs (in the urban Reading area) with many more reports of sightings, both dead and alive, than over the previous decade. I have started carrying around a large plastic flowerpot in the car again for scooping up any I find rolled up in the middle of the road. Less good news were two reports of hedgehogs being unrolled and eaten in non-badger areas. I hope that these were already injured and incapable of rolling up, but worry that foxes are learning new tricks.

Finally, 2024 marks the year that ring-necked parakeets established themselves across all of Reading. I met my first pair of young parakeets sitting together on a silver birch branch in my neighbour's garden well over a decade ago, and didn't have a clue what these greyish-yellowish things were. Luckily, Martin Sell was available then to interpret my verbal description and hand waving and diagnose parakeet fledglings. I had occasional sightings of adults, but never obvious flocks until two years ago when a (or maybe more) flock of parakeets cruised over Lower Caversham in the late spring, and then I had regular visitors in the garden in Earley in the autumn and winter. They are now habitual visitors all year round as they pull my flowers to bits whilst they wait for my neighbour to put out the bird food. In spring 2024 there were regular sightings in South Whitley, and by Autumn they were regular visitors to bird tables in Tilehurst. The spread Eastwards continues.

Obituary: Meryl Beek, 1929-2024

by **David Cliffe**

Meryl was involved in the running of the Society for many years, as Secretary and then Excursion Secretary. In the latter capacity she organised the field excursions and coach trips.

Coach trips required a great deal of preparation, and a good deal of patience – booking the coach, looking after the bookings and the money, and when it came to it, making sure that no-one was left behind, when setting out, and on the way back. Occasionally people were late, especially on the return trip, when they had mis-judged the distance or become lost (and Meryl, with her long experience, knew who these people were likely to be!).

But she did everything with good humour, and was a good committee member, practical and down to earth. She was also a great talker – there wasn't much chance of being bored when Meryl was near.

She went on almost all of the excursions for as long as she could, and was often accompanied by her husband, David. Her interest in natural history was inherited from her father, and this continued when the family moved to the area in 1972, in connection with David's job with an insurance company in Reading.

She also took an interest in the history of the Society, and in 2006, to mark our 125th anniversary, she put together an exhibition in the Central Library, along with David Cliffe. She was also helpful when David was putting together his presidential address on the Society's history, especially when it came to putting names to faces on photographs.

Some of our members went on one or other of the botanical tours around the mountains of Bulgaria, in 2001 and 2002. These were organised by the British-Bulgarian Friendship Society. Meryl was on the second of these tours, which was led by our own Alan Brickstock, and two Bulgarian botanists. Many wonderful things were seen and photographs taken, and a great deal of fun was had, including folk-dancing to bagpipes, with Meryl and Alan joining in with the best of them.

In 2006, the Society launched a project to identify locations of Herb Paris, the Society's logo, and to see whether it was still present in the places where it was recorded in the past. You can read Meryl's description of this project in the "welcome" section on our website.

As may be imagined, Meryl was always involved in the Christmas parties, arranging things, writing poems, and taking part. She was able to get to some of the indoor meetings until the Covid-19 restrictions were imposed. When her husband, David, died in 2020, she continued to live in her bungalow in Caversham, almost to the end of her life, and was happy to receive visitors.

Over her long life, Meryl had amassed a large and valuable collection of natural history books. These she left to the Society, to be sold to people who would appreciate and enjoy them, with the proceeds going towards the Society's funds. So, in different ways, she will live on in our memories.

Membership 2024

By Tricia Marcousé

Paid up Membership figures as they stand at the end of February 2025

(apologies: this period is not compatible with the calendar years in previous Naturalists)

Single Members	61
Family/Couples	72
Honorary Members	6
Student Members	6
Total	145

14 people did not renew their membership, but we welcomed 21 new members to the group

Lucy Norgate	Emily Aldridge
J(Wyndy) Millar	Debbie Ohanlon
Mick Corder	Imran Khan
Abigail Freeman	Josephine Frost
Charlotte Grant	Louisa Wood
Aiden Dingle	Janet and Graham John
Chris. Wicks and Liz Senator	Nicholas Bullows & Sarah Weeks
Lois Crouch and Graham Vernon	Lynn and Paul Mansfield

Black Darter (*Sympetrum danae*)

50 Acre Piece near Padworth Common

©Rob Stallard 2024

Members' Observations 2024

by **Katie Jenks, Julia Cooper** and **Rob Stallard**

2nd January 2024

Julia Cooper – has been hearing Tawny Owls at night from her Tilehurst house. A female and two males were heard calling together on 20/12/23. Alan Parfitt said that the owls start nesting in February so will be pairing up now.

Tricia Marcousé - a small flock of 5 Ring-necked Parakeets at Silverdale Road, Earley every day since 21/12/23. They have been seen around the area going from bird table to bird table and may be based in Maiden Erlegh woods.

Ian Duddle – Song Thrushes are singing early in the mornings in his Tilehurst garden, 01/01/24.

John Booth – saw a male Blackcap in his Earley garden and also a small Bumblebee drinking from Cyclamen flowers on 01/01/24.

Sally Rankin – had participated in the BSBI New Year Plant Hunt in Henley-on-Thames today. She had found 22 flowering species, as well as a new find for her of Butcher's Broom.

16th January 2024

Tricia Marcousé – is still having the 5 Ring-necked Parakeets visit the bird table in her Earley garden on a daily basis, 16/01/24.

Katie Jenks – has seen Ravens flying over Tilehurst; a pair and once a group of 3, last seen 13/01/24.

6th February 2024

Anne Booth – a Grey Heron pair has started building a nest on the island in Maiden Erlegh lake. As far as Anne is aware, this is the first time.

Tricia Marcousé – the Ring-necked Parakeet flock have now increased to 10 in number and are visiting her Earley garden up to 4 times a day. Some are spending most of the day in her Yew tree, 06/02/24.

Jan Haseler – saw 2 Muntjac deer grazing next to the westbound M4 hard shoulder, just a few hundred yards from Junction 12 on 04/02/24.

Julia Cooper – reported some Red Admiral sightings - one at Inge Becks' garden in Cookham Dean on 26/01/24 and one in her own Tilehurst garden on 28/01/24.

Cathy Harris – also saw a Red Admiral in her Earley garden on 28/01/24.

Rob Stallard – had a queen Bumblebee (*Bombus* sp.) and Honeybees in his Tilehurst garden on 28/01/24.

John Sharpe – saw a Kingfisher on the Holy Brook behind Reading Library on 16/01/24. He mentioned that there have been numerous reports of Otters around Huntley Wharf in Reading. He had seen something large and fast on 16/01/24 but could not identify it. Katie Jenks confirmed that she had recently seen video footage of 3 Otters at the weir there.

20th February 2024

Renée Grayer – reported butterfly sightings: 2 Red Admirals in the Harris Gardens at the University of Reading on 13/02/24 and 2 Brimstones in her Earley garden on 15/02/24. She also had a Pipistrelle sp. bat flying in her garden on 18/02/24.

Jan Haseler – saw frogspawn in her Tilehurst garden pond for the first time this year on 19/02/24. Her peak count of Common Frogs is 11 so far.

Dorothy Marshall – had her first Hairy-footed Flower Bee (male) in her Pangbourne garden today. She also saw a Brimstone butterfly there on 15/02/24 and Goldcrest were present over the first two weeks of February.

Alan Parfitt – Lesser Celandines are now out in his Henley-on-Thames garden, which he thought was early.

Grahame Hawker – says that the new heronry at Maiden Erlegh lake is establishing itself. There are also Ring-Necked Parakeets there.

Tricia Marcousé – a Brimstone butterfly at Castle Hill junction in Reading on 15/02/24.

Joanne Power – says that something is eating all of the fish along Eastfield Lane in Whitchurch-on-Thames, possibly either Otter or Mink.

5th March 2024

Ian Duddle – had a Red Admiral butterfly in his Tilehurst garden last week and a Comma on 4/03/24. The Honeybees have been on the wing for the last couple of weeks. He also spotted a Raven flying over his garden today.

Dorothy Marshall – the first female Hairy-footed Flower Bee in her Pangbourne garden on 03/03/24; with two males in hot pursuit.

Jane Sellwood – reported that the toad migration at Farley Hill had nearly 70+ Common Toads crossing the road in the second and third week of February. She thought that they were moving later in the evenings than previous years. Jane also commented that she has her first frogspawn in her Lower Earley garden pond today.

Tricia Marcousé – commented that a Golden Pheasant has been seen around Maiden Erlegh over the last two weeks.

19th March 2024

Rob Stallard – reports that Hairy-footed Flower Bees were active in his Tilehurst garden on 17/03/24.

Tricia Marcousé – had a female Blackcap inspecting the Ivy on her garage on 14/03/24. She also saw a Hairy-footed Flower Bee on violets in north Whitley on 17/03/24.

John Sharpe – saw his first Peacock butterfly of the year in his central Reading garden on 14/03/24.

Dorothy Marshall – for the first time, has had a group of Siskin in her Pangbourne garden over the last 2 weeks. There have been at least 4 males and 1 female. She saw a Bee-fly in her garden on 17/03/24.

1st October 2024

Jan Haseler – since September, Waxcaps have been appearing on the back lawn at her Tilehurst garden. She was also thrilled to see Glow-worms to the west of Sulham Lane in September, at the boundary between a field and woodland.

Tricia Marcousé – saw Ring-necked Parakeets in Winton Road, south Reading on 28 & 29/09/24.

Ian Duddle – A Sparrowhawk was being mobbed by crows in his Tilehurst garden today.

Tom Walker – reported in the October newsletter that in mid-September there were huge numbers of Ermine Moths on Willow trees at Green Park, Reading.

15th October 2024

David Owens – saw a Common Blue butterfly on the path between the copse and Sulham Woods on 04/10/24. He also saw what he thought was a Black Woodpecker on peanuts in his Earley garden.

Julia Cooper – has red/ orange Waxcaps in her Tilehurst garden at the moment.

Jan Haseler – has two types of Waxcap in her Tilehurst garden now; a white Waxcap and the Blackening Waxcap.

Jane Wolstencroft – reported that her Merlin app picked up Firecrest in Caversham this month.

5th November 2024

Tricia Marcousé - has a Daffodil in flower today in her Reading garden, which should not flower until March. She commented that she has Ivy in flower but very few Bees or Hoverflies.

Cathy Harris – saw a flock of Ring-necked Parakeets fly over Northumberland Avenue today. She also has a Fatsia in flower which is attracting a few Bumblebees and Hoverflies.

Ian Duddle – saw a Red Admiral in Long Lane, Tilehurst on 30/11/24.

Katie Jenks – held a Fungi Walk at McIlroy Park on 03/11/24 where there was a large variety of Waxcaps. Jan Haseler then said that Moor Copse meadows are having a very good year for Waxcaps, especially red ones.

19th November 2024

Tricia Marcousé – a Blackcap in her garden in Earley, tearing the flowers on Wintersweet.

Fiona Brown – a Great White Egret on Twyford Lakes yesterday.

John Lerpiniere – a Ring-necked Parakeet flew over his Tilehurst garden and he saw a Large White caterpillar there last week. Julia Cooper had seen a Small White caterpillar in their Tilehurst garden in the last week but before the colder weather.

Sally Rankin – 2 Redwings in her Henley garden on Sunday 17/11/24.

John and Anne Booth - also had Redwings in their Earley garden, and saw an Avocet at Fobney Meadows on 12/11/24.

3rd December 2024

Tricia Marcousé – had seen a Buff-tailed Bumblebee on Mahonia in her Earley garden on 02/12/2024. She also reported a pair of Carrion Crows mobbing a Red Kite in a Caversham Heights garden.

Rob Stallard – reported a Red Admiral in Nunhide Lane on 29/11/24.

Grahame Hawker – saw a Speckled Wood near Kingsclere on 26/11/24 and a pair of Ravens flying over Padworth Common on 02/12/24.

Julia Cooper - had seen Fieldfares, Redwings, Golden Plover and Lapwing on the Ridgeway near Blewbury on 26/11/24 and 28/11/24.

Indoor Meetings 2024

Reports by Fiona Brown, Katie Jenks, Grahame Hawker, Tricia Marcousé, Rob Stallard, Rachel Woolnough

2nd January 2024

Saving the Stone Curlew by **Keith Betton**

Keith Betton is Chair of the Hampshire Ornithological Society and devotes much of his summer to helping to protect the small population of Stone Curlews that breed on the downs in Hampshire.

Stone Curlews belong to the Thick-knee family and are present in small numbers in Southern England and East Anglia. They breed in Europe and Asia, over-winter in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula and are resident in Iberia and North Africa. Ten species of Thick-knee are found around the world. They all have yellow legs and eyes and thick knees which gives them their name.

Stone Curlews are 42cm long, 80cm wingspan, weigh 500g and they breed after returning from their first winter away. In Britain they nest twice, in April and July which is quite unusual. In hot places they only nest once probably because the ground is too dry, and insects to feed their chicks are in short supply. They typically lay two eggs incubated for 27 days. The chicks leave the nest 4-6 hours after hatching and they can live for up to 22 years. They are quite bulky with long wings enabling long distance migration. Huge eyes help them find food at dusk.

The Stone Curlew is the only species of Thick-knee that migrates. Ringing has increased migration records including in France, Morocco, and Ghana. Some birds die whilst migrating, for example being killed by Peregrines as they pass over Southampton during the night, illuminated by artificial light levels.

Their ideal habitat is open plain with rabbits keeping the grass low allowing a clear view of predators. Downland rabbit populations are low hence keeping the grass short has become a problem. Stone Curlew breeding areas have become smaller and fewer particularly in South Hampshire, but there are birds on the borders with Wiltshire and Berkshire. This is a real change in distribution.

In the 1980s the RSPB started helping the Stone Curlews. Later, the Hampshire Ornithological Society took on the project in Hampshire, reporting to the RSPB. Volunteers survey farms where Stone Curlews are present. This is best done at dust in the summer when their calls can be heard. A two-hectare area is prepared with lightly turned soil. The plot has two sides with a central green buffer. If a pair of birds use one side to nest, the other side is reploughed to prevent vegetation getting too high. If they fail to breed quickly, they can move to the other side where the conditions are perfect for them. This is repeated in June for their second breeding season. The green buffer provides cover for the chicks to avoid being spotted by raptors.

In April, the adults start displaying. The male collects stones in a circle and if the female approves, she will lay her eggs on the stones providing protection from mud which would prevent the eggs from hatching. When the chicks hatch the parents feed them on worms. It is important for volunteers to measure and weigh the eggs to estimate when the eggs will hatch. Eggs get lighter as the chick uses up the yolk. The farmer can then avoid the site once the chicks have hatched. They develop quickly and soon start to resemble adults. They are located using a telescope at the edge of the field whilst a second person approaches the birds. The chicks are then ringed, checked and weighed. 0.6 of a fledged chick per pair per year is needed to keep the population stable. Currently this is being exceeded.

Farmers who collaborate with the volunteers are proud of their work. Sometimes birds find their own site on another farm and the farmer is approached to see what can be done to make this work. When the project began in 1992 there were about fifty pairs in Wessex, now there are about 130 pairs. There are more birds nesting than at any time in living memory.

16th January

Birds and Mammals of the Terai Lowlands by Matt Eade (Naturetrek Ltd)

This 12-day wildlife holiday goes in search of Tigers and other spectacular wildlife in Chitwan and Bardia National Parks, two of Nepal's finest lowland reserves. India may be the destination best known for the reliability of its Tiger sightings, yet, in the lowland parks of neighbouring Nepal, Tiger densities are often higher and tourist numbers are considerably lower. Here, one is able to explore the domain of the Tiger and its prey on foot, immersing oneself in the sights and sounds of the jungle, which is forbidden in most Indian reserves. The scenery is second to none, the snowbound summits of the high Himalaya dominating the northern horizon. Nepal's Tigers are not as habituated as they are in the parks of central India, and they can be vanishingly elusive amongst their dense habitat of tall elephant grass and tangled riverine jungles, but this just serves to make a Tiger sighting in the country's wildlife-rich lowlands (known as the Terai) all the more thrilling and rewarding.

On this new tour we will focus on two of Nepal's very best national parks, Bardia and Chitwan. We will stay in two of the country's most spectacular wildlife lodges, Tiger Tops Karnali Lodge in Bardia and Tiger Tops Tharu Lodge in Chitwan. We will search for Tigers and the wealth of other wildlife in these parks on jeep safaris, and in Bardia we will focus especially on the use of 'blinds' (small, specially constructed hides), from which we will patiently scan the broad Karnali River and its sandy shores and islands at dawn and dusk, hoping for the appearance of our quarry. We will also enjoy boat trips along the parks' rivers and, best of all, we will explore the realm of the Tiger on foot, experiencing the raw essence of the heart of the jungle.

On our arrival in Nepal, we will stay in the country's finest heritage hotel, Dwarika's, a heartening cultural experience in itself. We will then fly to Nepalganj in western Nepal, before making the 2-hour drive to Tiger Tops Karnali Lodge, situated on the very edge of Bardia National Park. A 4 night stay here will give us ample time in which to explore the park's Sal forests, grasslands and riverine habitats in search of Greater One-horned Rhinoceros, Swamp Deer, Blackbuck, Gangetic River Dolphin and Tiger, not to mention a rich collection of birdlife.

Leaving Bardia, we will drive eastwards through the Terai to the lovely Tiger Tops Tharu Lodge – our base for a further four nights whilst we explore Chitwan National Park, home to an even greater concentration of wildlife and backed by the distant snow-capped peaks of the Himalaya. Sloth Bear, Asian Elephant and some of the park's 500 or more Indian Rhinoceroses may be amongst our wildlife rewards here, before we must retreat to the opulent Dwarika's Hotel in Kathmandu for our final night in Nepal. Please note that while the October departure will be superb for scenery and the mountain views, the chances of a Tiger sighting are lower at this time of year.

For those wishing to stay a little longer, we are offering a 3-night extension to Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge. Perched 1,000 feet above the Pokhara Valley, and framed by Himalayan peaks, the lodge provides a spectacular setting, and access to some exciting mountain birds, including Great Barbet, White-crested Laughingthrush and Green Magpie.

6th February

Life at Hydrothermal Vents by **Professor Jon Copley, Southampton University**

Jon Copley is a marine biologist who has spent 14 years researching life at hydrothermal vents in the oceans. Jon explained how they form where new crust is created at mid oceanic rift systems. Water slowly permeates the solidifying rock leaching out minerals on its journey down to 2km before coming back up and being expelled at a high temperature (up to 400 °C) along the spreading centre of the ridge. On land this type of volcanic activity would have formed geysers. Vents also form over mantle hot spots such as Iceland and the Hawaii islands, but most vents are located at mid ocean ridges. These vents build fragile towers on average 20cm diameter up to 7m high as the superheated steam immediately precipitates out the mineral content on contact with the cold sea water – these are known as 'black smokers'. The vent systems are short-lived compared to the long geological time scale; they range from decades to thousands of years. They are also isolated – it may be 10km or more to the nearest cluster of vents.

As they are at such a depth of water there is no light, so the discovery of teeming life around a vent near the Galapagos Islands in 1977 was totally unexpected. The source of energy cannot be photosynthesis, instead it is chemosynthesis. Specialist bacteria take the energy from sulphur (although other chemicals can be used); together with an electron acceptor they complete the reaction chain to create organic compounds. Near the vents the only electron acceptor available is oxygen and so they are reliant on inflow of dissolved oxygen. The bacteria form the base of the food pyramid for the diverse range of animals living around the vent.

Jon described some of the curious creatures that inhabit this hostile, strange environment. By comparing the assemblage of species at different vent systems scientists have been surprised to see huge variations. As the vent systems in different oceans are so remote from each other there is no way that eggs, larvae or adults of any species could move from one to another, only between vents within a local area. Jon recently explored a vent system in the Caribbean to discover whether the assemblage would resemble those of the Atlantic or the Pacific or a mixture of both. As the Panama straits closed only a few million years ago it would have been feasible for some Pacific species to be found there, in fact they turned out to be very similar to Atlantic systems. The different assemblages are very clearly geographically delineated.

The primary food source is the bacteria which feed on the sulphur rich waters. The next range of animals feed on the bacteria. The Pompeii tube worm has evolved to tolerate high temperatures close to the vent by modifying its collagen. Some, such as shrimps, feed on the bacteria directly by just scraping them off the rock or their own lungs and bodies. Others including the scaly-foot snail carry the bacteria internally in their guts. This snail has also developed the ability to precipitate iron sulphide (iron pyrites) as a by-product. This previously unknown method produces this mineral at low temperatures and as this is needed for products like solar panels, understanding this process has economic potential. Other creatures at the vent include barnacles, mussels and crabs.

As it is so dark there is no need for creatures to have eyes, so many of them have evolved to do away with eyes– as also happens in cave systems. Some shrimp species have developed an extremely light and heat sensitive area on their backs which allows them to locate neighbouring vents. They can also detect hydrogen sulphide at astonishingly low concentrations.

There is a bit of a mystery as to how species colonise the vents as they are so remote. Bacteria and organisms feeding on them could inhabit wood drifting on the sea surface. The wood would gradually decay and sink downwards to the vent area. If the organisms adapt to living in the sulphur rich

conditions, they can then colonise the area. So the vents are subject to occasional influx of new species and this explains the different assemblages in different oceans. This situation resembles that of isolated islands where species can rapidly evolve to exploit the local conditions.

Vents are relatively short-lived and this makes life fragile. Many of the species that have evolved there are relatively recent in age. Some believe that the first life on Earth began at these vent systems four billion years ago. This remains an open question but there are no relicts of these early life-forms at the vents that have survived through to the present day.

There is also a strict zonal arrangement of species at vents. Nearest the vent are the ones that can tolerate high sulphur, low oxygen and high temperature while others further out specialise in the reverse conditions. In the Atlantic zone systems, the species groups from the vent outwards go from crab to snail to stalk barnacle to anemone to scavengers. The zones are much more rigidly kept than the famous succession of organisms in littoral coastal habitats that depend on water depth and tidal energy.

There are threats to the vent systems from deep sea mining. The chimney stacks are rich in minerals, especially copper, and so would be economic to mine. Jon has campaigned to protect these fragile systems that occupy such a small area (only 50 km^2 in total for the whole world) and are home to many species that live nowhere else. He is hopeful that the international agreements that have been made will protect them. The vent systems, even though so remote, do suffer from human pollution. Another threat comes from climate change. The vent systems rely on dissolved oxygen, and this will be in shorter supply as the seas warm up because oxygen is less soluble in warmer water . There may also be shifts in ocean currents that carry the oxygen. However, these changes are slow, taking hundreds of years to reach the vent systems.

20th February

Flora of the Eastern Pyrenees by **Dr Brian Ferry (Royal Holloway College)**

From 1990 - 2010 Brian made annual visits to the Eastern Pyrenees where he made detailed studies of the flora. The flora is essentially Mediterranean in type, but with great altitudinal variation in forest species from lowland valleys, often dominated by evergreen oak forests, to high altitude beech and conifer forests. Forests at lower levels are interspersed with scrub vegetation and, despite summer droughts over the region, some wetland areas.

The 40*40 km area he visited is north and south of the N116 going west from the Mediterranean through Perpignon and towards Andorra and includes mountainous areas to nearly 3000 metres as well as lowlands. There is a distinct change in geology with the southern high ground of older acidic rocks and the northern lower lands north of Sournia of younger cretaceous chalk.

A lot of the lower slopes had been made into agricultural terraces, having cut down past evergreen forests and allowing subsequent cultivation and grazing, but changes in population in the mid-20th century as people moved to cities mean that these areas were abandoned for agriculture (which was retained on easier lowland areas) and natural recolonisation has made two distinct scrub habitats of **Garrigue** or **Maquis.**

Garrigue is a low scrubland with individual trees or small thickets found on limestone soils, and generally near the coast. Holm Oak, Holly Oaks and juniper are characteristic trees within these areas. Lower vegetation forms hummocks of vegetation including thyme, rosemary and a 0.5metre high

broom, *Genista scorpius.* Cistus is the dominant shrub with 30 species seen around the Mediterranean, and 2 dominant in the Pyrenees: *Cistus albidus* and *Cistus laurifolius*. The senecio (*Senecio inaequidens*) appeared in 2002 from South Africa and is now becoming the dominant plant on pathways through the areas.

Maquis is similar to Garrigue, but is associated with siliceous (acid) soils. The vegetation is denser being composed of numerous closely spaced shrubs about 1 metre apart, mainly evergreen. The Kermes Oak (*Quercus coccifera*) up to 3 metres in height with holly-like leaves and beautiful acorns in spiky cups is typical.

Higher altitudes have beech forest and then pine forest and Brian noted that mistletoe grows on Scots Pine in this area unlike in the UK. Within the woods, and on open uplands, are gentians including the great yellow gentian (*Gentiana lutea*) growing to 2 metres height and the smaller yellow gentian (*G. burseri*) both Martagon and Yellow Turk's cap lilies (*Lilium martagon* and *L. pyrenaicum*).

In the higher sub-alpine region (over 2000m) Brian saw the blue gentians (*G. verna* and *G. acaulis*) and the more purple flowered *G. pyrenaica* with frilly edges. Other notable species were the rare Pyrenean pheasant's eye (*Adonis pyrenaica*), the alpine pasqueflower (*Pulsatilla alpina*) and the fringed pink (*Dianthus monspessulanus*). Back at lower levels are meadows and wetlands with large numbers of species that can be seen in the UK, but at a much higher density.

The range of habitats within a small area, and the number of indigenous species, makes the Eastern Pyrenees a fantastic place for botanical exploration and associated birds and butterflies. Well worth putting on the holiday bucket list.

5 March 2024

The Difficult Plant Problem by **Dr Tim Rich (BSBI)**

Tim is a specialist botanist interested in all aspects of plant ecology, taxonomy and physiology. He is author or co-editor of many prestigious BSBI publications, such as the Plant Crib, and Handbooks on Crucifers, on Whitebeams and on British Northern Hawkweeds.

Tim began his talk explaining about 'difficult plants'. There are 13-14 genera that are more difficult to identify in the UK – 1200 'difficult' plants in comparison to 1470 'normal' plants: a substantial chunk. A lot are endemic to the UK and part of the problem is that there is not the expertise or manpower to identify them. There are few active professional botanists, and none are working in museums or universities. A consequence of this is that the recording information for difficult groups is skewed or out of date– for example what may be a relatively common hawkweed may not be recorded. One local example is a specific hawkweed found in the Goring Gap in 1959 and 1961 in chalk grassland. This was the only site in the UK for this species and has not been found or recorded since. Very little is known about it and there are very few people who are able to go out and rediscover it.

Why are some plants difficult to identify?

1. Taxonomy.
   E.g. Scurvy Grasses have 2 complex groups. Where does one group stop and another start? Some are very difficult to tell apart even for specialists as they are so morphologically similar.

2. Hybrids.
   E.g. Willows have 73 different hybrids with various combinations. Most have 2 parents, but some have 7 different parents. Again, identifying where one ends and another starts is often down to botanist opinion. Different botanists will record species differently and these variations can be seen county to county.

3. Morphologically reduced.
   E.g. Glassworts which are well adapted to their environment but extremely difficult to identify as there are so few characteristics.

4. Modified by environment.
   E.g. Dandelion species, which look very different depending on their climate and habitat. They would need to be grown side by side to correctly identify them. In Caesars Camp and a site in Sussex there is a hawkweed species that looks very different whether seen growing in open heathland or growing in the shady road verge habitat of Sussex.

5. Only identifiable at certain times of the year.
   Dandelions need spring leaves to see the differences. Glassworts need to be identified in the autumn to see the fruits.

6. Reproduce apomictically.
   There are many variations, and they may look different but on closer examination may be the same species.

How can we identify difficult plants?

Books are less reliable the more difficult the plant group is and illustrations will differ. There are quite a few pictures online but again, they may not be very reliable. Another option is to put your own photographs online – there are specialist Facebook groups, but the quality of identification can be variable and some species cannot be identified by photographs alone. ISpot is useful as more emphasis is put on the specialist advice. Species keys are available and those written by specialists are more reliable than those created by AI, especially for the difficult plant groups.

A more reliable way for ID is herbariums. Many are taxonomically up to date, with identification and voucher specimens checked. If you visit you can compare the specimens and some now put their images online. One disadvantage is that some are not up to date or revised – the Natural History Museum's dandelion taxonomy is from the 1970's. Another big issue is that some voucher specimens do not look like those in the field, so take specimens and photographs.

Using DNA to identify difficult plants is now becoming very popular but is not practical for most.

One of the most important ways to identify are to look at the BSBI and other specialist databases, specialist BSBI handbooks (now available as digital downloads), various journals, county and flora atlases, and asking experts via the BSBI. The main messages for us from Tim is to collate all existing knowledge of a species, get out into the field, confirm identification and pass on your knowledge.

19th March

Post AGM talk and quiz

Local Nature Recovery Strategy and other local consultations by **Tricia Marcousé**

Tricia talked about the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Meetings around the county will continue the process of what species need protecting in Berkshire and where. Wider public consultation will commence in April, followed by a full report and strategy, which will have statutory validation. The aim is completion by the autumn and the co-ordinator will hopefully give RDNHS a talk early in 2025. All information will be included in the next RDNHS newsletter.

There is a review of local planning in Reading taking place at the moment – consultations are being carried out to ensure climate change policies are included. The Reading Climate Action Plan 2025/2030 will start consultations on the preferred actions this week and continue throughout the summer. This will have wider public consultation in 2025 before implementation in November.

The evening ended with a Moth quiz organised by Katie Jenks.

1st October

Shakespeare's Birds by **Ailsa Claybourn**

Being a bird expert, ex-teacher and self-confessed Shakespeare groupie, Ailsa's talk was interesting, entertaining and informative.

Shakespeare mentioned more than 60 different species in his plays. In Shakespeare's day, most of the population were rural, or lived in small towns, and compared to today, most bird species were considerably more abundant. This meant that the audiences at his plays would not only have been able to identify the majority of bird species but would also have been familiar with each species characteristics, folklore, cultural associations, and analogies. Shakespeare was able to use this familiarity and knowledge of his audience to use different bird species to subconsciously in a single sentence evoke facets of a character's personality, without having to resort to long descriptive passages, which would have interrupted the pace and flow of the action.

Throughout the talk Ailsa interspersed the play references with information on each bird species.

Romeo and Juliet:

Benvolio – "Compare her face with some that I shall show, and I will make thee think thy swan a crow". Here he tries to persuade Romeo that the girl he has his eye on is more of a crow than a beautiful white pure swan.

Macbeth:

Lady Macbeth – "The raven himself is hoarse that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements"?
Here, she is referring to the raven's association with darkness and death, to allude to her plot to kill Duncan.
Banquo – "This gust of summer, the temple-haunting Martlet, does approve by his loved masonry that the heaven's breath smells wooingly here".

Here the Martlet is a House Martin and incorrectly he misinterprets the presence of House Martins on Macbeth's castle as an omen that it is a safe place to enter.

The Merchant of Venice and Henry IV part 1:

Portia – "He knows me as the blind man knows the cuckoo, by the bad voice"?
Henry IV – "So when he had occasion to be seen, he was but as the Cuckoo is in June, heard, not regarded".
Despite our modern love of the Cuckoo's call as a harbinger of spring, in Shakespeare's time, it was regarded as a repetitive, irritating song.

King Lear:
The Fool – "For, you know, nuncle, the hedge sparrow, (Dunnock) fed the Cuckoo so long that it had its head bit off by its young".
A reference to royal succession.
King Lear – "Detested kite! Thou liest"!
A reference to kites being detested for being scavengers.

In The Taming of the Shrew, training of a peregrine falcon is compared to taming a shrew woman.

Ailsa then went on to give us Shakespearian references and meanings for Kingfishers, Mallards, Little Grebes, Cormorants, Herons (Hernshaws), Woodcock, Tawny Owls, Barn Owls, and Starlings, before finishing by returning to the Mute Swan. This was particularly appropriate, as Shakespeare was nicknamed "the Swan of Avon".

Henry VI part 1:

Earl of Suffolk – "So doth the Swan her downy cygnets save, keeping them prisoner underneath her wings".
A reference to the young hitching a ride on her back.

The audience went away with a much greater understanding of both birds, and Shakespeare!

15 October 2024

The UK National Fruit Collection by **Dr Matthew Ordidge, University of Reading**

Matthew has been Scientific Curator of the UK National Fruit Collection for the last 15 years. After training in genetics, he now works in the University of Reading research area and Agriculture Policy Development.

Matthew initially talked about the collection's Crop Genetic Resources, which is raw material for improving and adapting crops to meet all future challenges. This sits in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture 2004 and includes international collections such as potatoes from Peru, maize from Mexico and the Millenium Seed Bank at Wakehurst Place.

The National Fruit Collection originated in 1922 at Wisley and moved in 1952 to Brogdale, Kent for PVR (Plant Variety Rights) testing and variety trialling. John 'Jock' Potter was the Curator 1936-1972 and largely responsible for developing it. The collection was supported by MAFF until 1990 and Defra from 1990 to date. The collection is maintained as a field gene bank with 3500 varieties of tree-fruit and vines, with two trees of each accession.

Matthew then went on to talk about self-compatibility. This forces outbreeding by the female flower organs rejecting pollen if similar to the host tree. It also creates the need to graft cultivars.

The collection holds 2200 accessions of apple, 540 of pear, 400 of cherry, 340 of plum and 100 others of medlar, hazelnuts, grapes and quinces. Each collection has different traits – these included size and shape characteristics, a large range of skin colour and texture, various flavours, different flowering and ripening times, a variety of chilling requirements (critical for some areas of the world) and pollination requirements which may be beneficial so as not to be as reliant on pollinators.

The aim of Scientific Curation is to develop the collection as a genetic resource. This is achieved by:

- Maintenance through pruning, spraying, health testing and harvesting.
- Characterization via morphological verification of cultivars against published descriptions.
- Information Management to run a database for public access.

The collection has both National and International collaboration with community-led orchard groups with potentially new local cultivars, which allows these to be added to the collection.

5th November

George Druce (1850 - 1932): Botany, Politics and Pharmacy by **Professor Stephen Harris (University of Oxford)**

George Druce was born in Northamptonshire and was apprenticed to P. Jeyes and Co in 1866. He passed his pharmaceutical exams to be a retail chemist in 1872, a time when the main source of drugs came from plants. He moved to Oxford in 1879 and set up his own shop, Druce & Co, in the High Street with living quarters above for himself and his mother, who did a lot of the retail work in the shop. He was important in the British Pharmaceutical Society introducing more rigorous exams (before Druce, pharmacists did not have to prove that they could identify the plants they collected or purchased for pharmaceutical use) and taking an active part in the revision of the Poisons Act that introduced registers for purchases.

He had political ambitions, becoming a city councillor in Oxford in 1892 and serving on the council for 30 years with a 2-year term as Mayor in 1900. He headed the public health committee, introducing a sewerage system in Oxford. He was aFellow of the Royal Society and a Justice of the Peace.

Druce's main interest was botany, starting with plants relevant to active pharmaceuticals, but then extending to finding new species and new sites for British flora. These included the Military Orchids at Hartslock, where he visited every year but kept their existence quiet. In April 1907, he was approached by Alice Thrower who wanted access to particular botanical specimens as watercolour subjects. The collaboration between the Thrower sisters and Druce resulted in 1800 accurate watercolours of British Flora. In addition, the social standing of the Throwers gave Druce access to landowners across the country, and hence new areas for botanical exploration and collection.

Although his main areas of work were around Oxford, he managed to collect specimens in all vice-counties of England in most years. He didn't appreciate winter weather in the UK and, from 1900s, went botanising and collecting overseas every year travelling in the US, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean and as far as Japan. At this time, specimens were collected rather than observed and may have been partly responsible for the disappearance of certain flora.
Despite his habits of hoovering up botanical specimens, Druce became involved in nature conservation. In 1912, he was a founder member of the Society for the Promotion of Nature alongside Charles Rothschild. This was the start of identifying and protecting habitats and documenting the

impact of farming practices on botanical species (such as drainage of marshes). This society became the Wildlife Trusts in the 1970s.

In 1880 Druce was a founder member of the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire which merged with the Oxfordshire Natural History Society in 1901. In 1886, he published *The Flora of Oxfordshire*, in 1887 *The Flora of Berkshire*, and in 1926 *The Flora of Buckinghamshire*.

In 1889, he was awarded the degree of honorary MA by the University of Oxfordand in 1895 he was appointed Fielding Curator in the Department of Botany at the University. At his death in 1932 he left his property to the University in a Trust to maintain the herbarium, and his collection of some 200-250,000 specimens forms part of the herbarium at the University of Oxford.

19th November

Storing Carbon Under Your Feet -Literally by **Dr Martin Lukac, University of Reading**

How can we use the natural environment to store carbon for as long as possible, particularly in the urban environment?

Monthly CO_2 concentrations measured in Hawaii over many years show a steady increase in the northern hemisphere over the last century, with regular and large annual fluctuations demonstrating the effect of plant growth on CO_2 concentrations in the atmosphere as respiration of plants varies between summer and winter months. Viable technologies (in the short term) to increase carbon storage and reduce net CO_2 emissions are afforestation and land-based weathering.

People (and the government) want to plant trees. The UK government target is 30,000 hectares a year by 2025, which has only been achieved once in the last 50 years (late 1980s). Within the UK, the only reasonable place to put additional trees is on agricultural land, about 70% of the land area. There is a conflict between policies and objectives for food security, carbon storage and biofuels.Urban greening does store carbon and also improves well-being, biodiversity, air temperature in summer and air quality, but there will not be room for much intensive tree planting. There needs to be a different methodology to use natural systems to store more carbon.

Photosynthesis takes CO_2 and energy out of the atmosphere plus water and nutrients from the soil to make carbon chains (mainly carbohydrates) that fuel life. Above ground, there is plant growth, below ground the carbohydrates feed the root system and also the mycorrhizal symbiosis (found in 95% of plants) which bring water and nutrient back through the roots to fuel the photosynthesis. The soil carbon is worked on by a huge variety of soil organisms that break down the large carbon molecules into smaller units, collect energy to propagate themselves and release CO_2 to atmosphere, sometimes as quickly as in minutes.

The goal is to retain as much carbon as possible in the soil for as long as possible. Typically, about 20-30% of the carbon in plant materials added to the soil (leaves, twigs, compost), where the soil is not then disturbed, is retained as stable organic compounds that are not broken down by soil organisms and build up the carbon stored in the soil. Within the urban environment, the problem is that too much of the carbon taken or fallen from the trees, hedges and herbaceous plants is removed for disposal or composting elsewhere. There are demands for tidiness, problems with slippery leaf litter, worries about urban fires etc. Although much of the plant biomass is returned to the soil somewhere after composting, the additional transport emits carbon from the fuel.

One thing that everyone can do is to keep the cycle as short as possible by leaving clippings in borders and lawns or composting on site. This also returns nutrients to the soil which allows more efficient photosynthesis and hence allows the soil to retain more carbon. Particularly important to retain the flowers, fruits and nuts which contain the most nutrients. Wood contains the least.

The other option for management of trees and hedges in urban areas is to convert to biochar. This is converting plant material into something that cannot be broken down by soil organisms through heat. It is a partial combustion process (and is a potentially air polluting system). Biochar retains the cell structure of wood, which provides an extra habitat for soil life and spaces for holding water and nutrients from the soil and hence improves soil health, although it does not provide nutrients or energy for soil biota itself This is a way to keep carbon incorporated in the soil for a long time, between 30-80% into long term storage depending on how well it is made.

Biochar will need charging prior to use, otherwise it will draw water and nutrients from the soil to initially fill the spaces within the carbon. Possibly human or animal urine can be used for this. Spreading biochar is simple as it can just be scattered over the ground.

To summarise, soil is a viable sink for carbon. Although no soil has infinite capacity to store carbon, soils are very depleted of nutrients and structure at the moment so that is not a problem. We can use urban vegetation to deliver carbon to the soil despite the need in urban areas to manage the plants rather than allow natural growth, accumulation of leaf litter and decay. Most of the carbon put into the soil is released back into the atmosphere as CO_2 very quickly (sometimes within minutes) but 20-30% will be retained for decades. Using well-made biochar could increase the amounts stored to 80%, and there are examples of biochar remaining in the soil for centuries. However, the collection of plant materials for making biochar means there will be consequential CO_2 emissions from transport of materials and the manufacturing process. It requires an area specific life cycle analysis.

3rd December 2024

The Call of Nature by Richard Jones

Dung is a complex ecosystem. It is valuable to humans in terms of fertiliser (wars have been fought over bird guano) and to the natural world because of its high nutritional content. For example, elephants eat so much herbage, and pass it so quickly, that only about 10% is digested.

Adult Dung beetles need dung to complete their lifecycle. They don't eat much themselves, but it is the foodstuff for their larvae. Each dung pat is a finite resource, so the insects have to get in quickly to secure their share. There are scientific reports showing that 4000 beetles are attracted to a half litre sample of elephant dung in 15 minutes. The yellow dung fly *(Scathophaga stercoraria)* can arrive the moment the pat hits the ground.

Beetles are the main breakers down of dung and there are several different strategies: rollers, tunnellers and dwellers. The most obvious ones are the roller scarabs. They scoop a ball of dung then set off, travelling for about 20 mins which gets them about 15 metres away. They then dig a hole, bury the ball, and lay an egg in it. The English scarab *(Copris)* is thought to be extinct in Britain, last sighted in Somerset in 1974.

In the UK we have the other 2 strategists. Tunnellers go straight down from underneath the dung, taking down morsels and packing individual chambers with it. Typical tunnellers in the UK are the Dumbledores (*Geotrupes*). They are powerful beetles about 2.5cm long and are important recyclers because of their size. Minotaurs are in this group and will drag individual rabbit droppings into their

tunnel which can be more than a metre deep. They use their horns to fight over the dung in the tunnels, via a shoving and pushing match. We also have hundreds of dwellers which remain in the pat. They are often small, and usually a pat is enough to look after however many turn up.

Dung beetles are a vital part of the ecosystem. Australia has about 600 species but they are adapted to the dry droppings of the native animals. Farm animals arrived with the first fleet in 1788, and 200 years later their biomass was 10-100 fold greater than all the native mammals. A problem developed with the dung that was produced. Because it wasn't being broken down by beetles, it was drying and smothering the pasture, causing disease and loss of foodstuff for the farm animals. Also, the Australian bush fly breeds in manure, and there were records of clouds like thick smoke flying around, hence the corked bush hats. A Hungarian entomologist arrived in the 1950s, noticed the problem and started the Australian dung beetle project, which ran for about 20 years. The aim was to introduce some non-native beetles that had co-evolved with the non-native animals. 52 dung beetle species were selected from around the world and captively bred for several years. Of those released, the African *Onthophagus gazella* is now the dominant one, and has been used in other places including Hawaii and Easter Island.

Due to the industrialisation of farming, there is now a new dung problem. Farmers give prophylactic injections to stock animals against parasites, but the chemicals, called ivermectins, are secreted in the dung making it insecticidal. At worst the recyclers are poisoned by it, at best they are disorientated or put off and don't reproduce. This could lead to a buildup of dung on the fields, but also significant loss of biodiversity.

17 December 2024

Christmas Party

Members met at Pangbourne Village Hall for the annual Christmas party with the usual delicious food and mulled wine. Graham and Lesley Hawker kindly provided quizzes in the form of anagrams of butterfly names and three sets of photographs depicting caterpillars, moths and food plants for identification. Rachel Woolnough organised our photographic competition which had an excellent mix of entries. A good time was had by all.

Photographic Competition 2024

By **Rachel Woolnough**

The Photographic competition was held in December during the Society's Christmas party. This year we implemented a more streamlined way for votes to be cast and counted, resulting in a calmer evening for the organisers. Pictures could be entered into the usual 9 categories, with members being allowed one vote per category with a further two votes for their overall favourite pictures.

Thank you to everyone who took part in the competition this year. We had a wonderful collection of 75 photos to vote for and enjoy. Winner and runner-up places in the individual categories were shared among ten different members. Grahame Hawker was the overall runner up, with his photo of a Merveille du Jour moth camouflaged on lichen. Congratulations to Tom Walker, who for the second-year running was the overall winner. His quirky picture, entitled "Jay's bath time", won hands down in both its category and the competition as a whole. It certainly made me smile.

The winning photos are in the centre pages of this Naturalist.

Excursions 2024

by **Jan Haseler, Sean O'Leary and Julia Cooper**

Marcus Wheeler led 22 members on a walk to look at the trees of the **Whiteknights campus of the University of Reading** on **Saturday 6 January**. It was a cold grey morning, but after days of torrential rain and storm-force winds, the wind had dropped and the rain had ceased. The walk started from near the sports centre on the north-west side of the campus. First stop was a group of trees by the car park. Nearest was a Horse Chestnut with big brown sticky buds. The tree looks at its best early in the summer, before the Horse-chestnut Leaf-miner moth has turned the leaves brown. Another of the trees, which had red buds, was identified as a Lime. Marcus then led the group across the nearest sports pitch to a mixed clump of mature trees. First inspected was a Sweet Chestnut, a species which was introduced to Britain by the Romans. A spiny seed case helped in its identification. Nearby was a Turkey Oak. Not far away was an enormous Giant Redwood with an estimated height of about 35 metres. This species was first introduced to Britain in 1853. The cones are covered in scales which look as if they have a smiley face across the middle. Next to be inspected was a Holly whose leaves were only prickly below the browsing line. A group of Paperbark Birches had attractive white trunks, while a Beech had characteristic long pointed brown buds. Its trunk is smooth, which makes it an attractive target for graffiti carvers. Next to be inspected was a Ginkgo, also known as the Maidenhair Tree. It was a 'fossil tree', originally known only from the fossil record, with recognisably related fossils dating back almost 300 million years to the Permian age. Then living trees were discovered in a remote area of central China, one of the world's biodiversity hot-spots. There are separate male and female trees. The female trees drop rather unpleasant smelling and tasting fruits, so most planted trees are males. Next find was a specimen of Cretan Maple, the only evergreen maple. Next, Marcus pointed out a Foxglove-tree. It produces large, violet-blue, sweet-smelling flowers in early spring. Members had to tread carefully because the grass below the trees had been planted with bulbs and their new leaves were already reaching up through the turf.

There followed a series of unusual trees. Japanese Redwood is a large tree which superficially resembles the Giant Redwood but has longer leaves and smaller cones. The seeds of the Kentucky Coffee Tree were roasted and used as a substitute for coffee beans by the early settlers – a risky business since the uncooked seeds are toxic. A Monterey Pine had leaves in bundles of three. Then there was a particularly large Swamp Cypress, a deciduous conifer from the Everglades in Florida. At the end of the library buildings was a London Plane, with characteristic dangling seed balls and flaking bark. Near Park House was a group of Cedars. A large Cedar of Lebanon had spreading level branches while a Himalayan Cedar had descending branches, and an Atlas Cedar had ascending branches.

The next part of the walk was through the Harris Garden. Near the entrance were a number of unusual trees, including a Caucasian Wingnut with dangling strings of seedpods, a Great White Cherry, a Paperbark Maple, a Persian Ironwood and a Wheel Tree. Butcher's-broom had red berries, and the first snowdrops were coming into flower. The garden was looking very tidy and well cared for, with closely mown lawns, weed-free flower beds and neatly trimmed-back perennials. Continuing further into the garden, there were two enormous Turkey Oaks, with lower branches bending down to the ground. To the left of the path were a pond, a Scarlet Oak which is native to eastern USA and a Caucasian Alder whose seed cones are larger than those of English or Italian Alder. At this point, a hunting Sparrowhawk flew past. A small and very spiky tree was identified as a Honey Locust. Nearby was a small Monkey Puzzle Tree which has flowers in summer. Continuing along the path, further sightings included another Ginkgo, a hybrid Strawberry Tree and a fastigiate Oak (one which grows in a columnar shape). A drumming woodpecker was heard. The path went past the cherry ring, which is a stunning sight at blossom time. Next seen were a Himalayan Cedar, a surprisingly big Bay Tree and another Giant Redwood. The path began to loop back towards the entrance to the garden, passing a Phoenecian Juniper with berries, a Wollemi Pine from Australia (another fossil tree), a fastigiate Beech

and an evergreen Holm Oak. Marcus then led the group back across the campus to the original starting point near the sports centre.

Lesley Dunlop led a walk to look at the geology of **Finchampstead Ridges** on the morning of **Saturday 3 February.** The weather was cloudy but not particularly cold. The drumming of a woodpecker was heard as 16 members gathered in the car park of the National Trust's Simon's Wood. Lesley explained that the bedrock below the car park was the Camberley Sands (and Clays), laid down about 44 million years ago in estuarine conditions. These are part of the Bracklesham Group. The surface deposits of the plateau at the top of the site are Sands and Gravels, laid down in the Anglian period of glaciation about 500,000 years ago. More recent Gravel deposits lower down at Moor Green lakes include flints, but also material such as Greensands from the Weald. The surface deposits of Sands and Gravels at the top of the site have been extensively worked in the past. The 1910 Ordnance Survey map shows a number of Gravel and Sand pits.

The walk started out northwards towards Heath Pond, leaving the Gravel deposits at the top and moving onto first the Camberley Sands and then the Sands of the Windlesham Formation, which is also part of the Bracklesham Group. Drainage water from the high ground here which has passed through the iron-rich Sands emerges lower down at the boundary with impermeable London Clay at places such as California Country Park and Rooks Nest Nature Reserve. These sites have characteristic orange streams with a high iron content and special bacteria which thrive in an iron-rich environment. Back at Simon's Wood, the track was dry underfoot as it passed over the Sand formations. The group walked down to the edge of an open area with Heather which stretches across to Heath Pond, then turned left along a wide sandy path with banks on either side. A brief wet section of path marked out a Clay layer. A small stream emerged on the left, crossed the path and then drained into the open area leading towards Heath Pond. Further on, deposits of orange sand in the bank at the side of the path were inspected closely. A fallen Birch trunk had the hard, black, warty, cushion-like growths of the Birch Woodwart. The track then ran along the back of the gardens of a number of houses. To the right of the track, the National Trust had cleared quite a large area of rhododendron. To the left of the track, the back gardens were smothered under a dense canopy of rhododendron. The track led to a lane which had been edged with Granite cobblestones. Lesley, who is an expert on Granite, said that the material had not come from the Cornish, Shap or Aberdeen Granite fields. Instead, it was most likely to have come from Portugal.

The walk then continued across Wellingtonia Avenue into the southern section of the National Trust's Finchampstead Ridges reserve. There is a narrow flat plateau at the top, then a very steep drop down towards the valley of the Blackwater. Fallen Silver Birch trunks had an interesting collection of fungi, including a Hoof Fungus, a cluster of Crimped Gill fungi and Blushing Brackets. Further on, a bright yellow Common Earthball demonstrated the *citrinum* part of its Latin name *Scleredoma citrinum.* A bench at the edge of the top plateau looked out over the precipitous woodland below. At the bottom of the steep hillside, streams emerge from springs on the underlying Clay. Contouring round the edge of the top plateau, the path led to another bench with an even better view, across the Blackwater valley to the Chalk ridge of the Hog's Back near Guildford. Lesley explained that there is a fold in the underlying geology, caused when Africa collided with Europe. The syncline goes from Finchampstead, across the low-lying Blackwater Valley and up to the Hog's Back. Gorse was in flower and a Buzzard circled below. A Bitter Oysterling was found on Birch and a line of Hollies marked out a Clay layer. Holly needs a somewhat damp environment and was not seen on any of the dry sandy substrates. The route then turned back towards the start, crossing first an open heathy area, then crossing Wellingtonia Avenue and finally walking through a short stretch of woodland and back to the start. The Wellingtonia Avenue is lined on both sides by enormous Giant Redwoods which were originally planted in 1869 as a monument to the first Duke of Wellington.

On the afternoon of **Saturday 23 March**, Sean O'Leary led 17 members on a walk to look at mosses and liverworts at **Withymead Nature Reserve**, on the east bank of the Thames between Goring and South Stoke. The weather was cloudy but not particularly cold. This site has a variety of riverside habitats and a good total of over 90 species including *Bryum pallescens*, which is rare in the county. Adjacent to the river is a wide strip of marshland. It had been underwater during the January floods but was now mostly merely soggy. A boardwalk crosses the marsh, with the planks wrapped in metal mesh for a better grip underfoot. *Bryum pallescens,* a moss that will tolerate metallic runoff, was found on the boardwalk. Drifts of Loddon Lily were just coming into flower in the marshland. Warden Pete Morton predicted that they would be at their peak in mid-April. Also seen here were Cuckooflower and the leaves of Common Meadow-rue.

The soil in the reserve is largely calcareous, so moss species such as *Thamnobryum alopecurum* and *Calliergonella cuspidata* attracted attention amongst the commoner species such as *Hypnum cupressiforme* and *Brachythecium rutabulum*. A lovely mossy lawn by the house was rich in bryophyte species, including the common *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus*. The damp, sheltered conditions meant that the old willow trees supported epiphytes such as *Lewinskya affine* and *Metzgeria violacea*. At the end of the walk, the Warden and his team of volunteers kindly provided tea and cakes at the Study Centre to round off the visit. A Slow-worm was spotted under a refuge at the back of the Study Centre. It slid off underground when disturbed. Also seen nearby were a Buzzard and a Redwing. A Mistle Thrush was singing, and Chiffchaffs and a Great Spotted Woodpecker were heard.

Sally Rankin led a walk to **Swain's Wood**, a permit-only BBOWT reserve between **Christmas Common** and **Turville Heath**, on the afternoon of **Saturday 6 April**. The weather was warm and sunny, but with a strong south-westerly wind. A Kestrel flew overhead as 21 members gathered around the village green at Northend, before setting off down Holloway Lane. A male Orange-tip was the first butterfly sighting, followed soon after by a Peacock. The verges proved to be productive places for plants, with flowers of Barren Strawberry, Common Dog-violet, Greater Stitchwort and Goldilocks Buttercup, and leaves of Woodruff and Sanicle. The route then led through a gateway on the right into woodland, where Wood Anemones and the first of the Bluebells were in flower.

The path continued downhill to a steep-sided grassy valley. Sally told the group that Swain's Wood was one of just 3 sites in Britain for the Military Orchid, where it is at the northern limit of its range. She urged members to look very carefully where they were putting their feet and to avoid treading on the Military Orchid leaves. Many of the leaf rosettes were already protected from browsing animals, especially deer, by wire netting cages. For many years, Military Orchids hung on at the site with just a handful of plants, but from 1984 onwards, the orchids here and at Homefield Wood were hand-pollinated. As a result, numbers climbed to 400+ at Swain's Wood and 700+ at Homefield Wood. Despite their best efforts, the reserve team were unable to find out what was the natural pollinator for the orchids.

The steep bank at the entrance to the reserve was covered with Primroses, looking beautiful in the sunlight. Three male Brimstone butterflies were flying round and nectaring on the Primrose flowers, their wings an almost perfect match with the colour of the petals. Dark-edged Bee-flies were also visiting the Primrose flowers. Hairy Violets were dotted through the grass, identified by their blunt sepals and the hairy undersides to their leaves. There were also many Cowslip flowers. The heads of last season's Carline Thistles could still be seen. The walk continued down to the bottom of the reserve. In the distance, a herd of at least 30 Fallow Deer crossed a grassy field, then jumped one by one over the fence and into the adjoining woodland. During the walk back up the valley on the other side of the reserve, Sally pointed out the leaf rosettes of a number of different orchid species. The Military Orchids had wide unspotted keeled leaves, arranged in groups of three. The unspotted leaves of the Chalk Fragrant Orchids lay in a single plane. The leaves of the Common Spotted-orchids had transversely

elongated dark spots. Sally also pointed out a False Oxlip, the hybrid between Cowslip and Primrose. It had large Primrose-sized flowers arranged in an umbel, like the smaller Cowslip. The group then walked back up to the reserve entrance, through the adjoining woodland and back along Holloway Lane.

Roger Dobbs led 11 members on a walk round **BBOWT's Bowdown Woods reserve** on the cold grey morning of **Saturday 27 April**. The reserve lies to the north of Greenham Common, where the land slopes steeply down to the valley of the River Kennet. The visit had been timed to catch Bluebell time at its peak and parts of the reserve were a sea of blue. Roger described the great variety of the woodland within the reserve, caused by variations in geology, aspect, hydrology and management history. The morning's aim was to explore the western part of the Bowdown Woods complex.

The walk started out along the main track around the bomb site, but soon turned left along a path which followed the edge of the Bowdown House grounds. First stop was an area of woodland with scattered big oak trees with Bluebells beneath them. Roger estimated that the oaks were several hundred years old. Bird and bat boxes had been attached to trees throughout the reserve, including the ones which were being inspected here. The garden of Bowdown House had a thicket of Bamboo up against the boundary fence. Roger said that they did their best to remove any Bamboo which spread into the reserve. The path crossed two steep-sided valleys. On the right of the path, in an area of woodland, a moss-covered oak had a fern growing high up on one of its branches. Flowers of Solomon's-seal and Greater Stitchwort were seen. Piles of branches marked where Holly had been cut down. It had been increasing rapidly, shading out the ground flora. Roger pointed out an open area on the left of the path which he said was good for Grass Snakes and Slow-worms. Formerly there had also been Adders here. Gravel had been extracted from here, then later the excavated area had been filled with paper and pulp from the board mills at Colthrop. There would soon be a good display of Foxgloves.

The path continued to the site of an earlier location of the reserve car park. The approach track had been closed to deter nuisance users. A Muntjac deer crossed the field on the other side of the track. The next path turned back into the reserve, heading east and north through another fine display of Bluebells. A party of Long-tailed Tits was seen, and Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Blackbird were heard. A path which led steeply down to the northern boundary of the reserve had been closed, due to the danger of falling Ash trees infected by Ash Dieback disease. Roger said that BBOWT is spending £750,000 on removing diseased Ash trees from the reserve. He pointed out the site of the first coppice plot which volunteers had worked on here. The Hazels were looking rather dense and in need of a cut. Continuing along the path, Roger pointed out the most recent coppice plot. It had not been left as clear and open to the sun as he would have liked, because diseased Ash trees had not been felled. Habitat piles of brash and wood had been left as cover for wildlife. Further along the path, flowers of Wood-sorrel were seen, then a board-walk crossed a boggy section. A few flowers of Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage were spotted down in the mire and Bog Stitchwort was found. The next section of wet woodland was described by Roger as Alder carr. The Alders had tall straight stems, with the wood good for gunpowder and charcoal. Also, it does not rot in wet conditions.

The path climbed into a drier section where Yellow Archangel, Wood Spurge, Moschatel and Three-nerved Sandwort were all found in flower. On the right hand side of the path, a number of dead or dying Ash trees had patches of the white lichen *Phlyctis argena* on their trunks. A diseased Ash with a deep crack had been cut off higher up, in case the crack was home to a bat or bird. Flowers of Wood Anemone, Bugle and Cuckooflower were found in this section and a Green Woodpecker was heard. The path led to the bottom of a wide valley which is kept open and runs up to the boundary with Bowdown House. Turning up the valley, a pond on the left is a good place to see dragonflies in summer. The management policy is to keep at least a third of the surface clear, and encroaching reeds and sedges are removed. Marsh-marigolds made a bold splash of yellow around the pond and higher up

the valley. Bramble and raspberry scrub is cut back, creating a good habitat for blue butterflies. Heather was growing in places on the side of the valley and the leaves of Pignut and Common Sorrel were found here. After climbing up to the top of the valley, the route led back to the Bomb-site main track. A few members returned to the car park at this point, but the rest spent a little while exploring the Bomb-site. Willow Warbler and Blackcap were singing. The management plan aims to keep a field at the top of the site open. Scrub and trees increased undesirably during Covid but the BBOWT management team now have access to a small tractor with cutting implements and are bringing the scrub under control. The undersides of several reptile refuges were inspected. One sheltered two Slow-worms and another sheltered a single Slow-worm.

Following on from the Society's successful visit in September 2023, Graham Steven of Natural England led a return visit to **Aldermaston Gravel Pits** on the morning of **Saturday 18 May**. The site is managed by Natural England. There is no public access and it is kept locked. As was expected, sightings in May were very different from what had been seen the previous September. It was a cool, cloudy morning, but brightened up with occasional bursts of sunshine towards the end of the walk. When Graham had first arrived on site that morning, he had seen a Grass Snake and heard a singing Nightingale not far from the entrance. The first part of the walk, attended by 16 members, was over an extensive area of dry, stony ground where flower sightings included Common Stork's-bill, Thyme-leaved Sandwort, Rue-leaved Saxifrage, Sheep's Sorrel, Common Cornsalad, Thyme-leaved Speedwell, Wall Speedwell and Heath Speedwell. Plants identified by their leaves included Hoary Plantain, Common Centaury, Common and Blue Fleabane, Field Madder, Yellow-wort and the rare Wall Bedstraw. Hairy Sedge and Dog's-tooth Lichen were abundant and a small clump of Early Hair-grass was inspected.

The walk continued past a gravel bank where several Bee Orchid spikes looked as if they would soon be coming into flower. There were many Wild Strawberry flowers, plus a single ripe berry. Graham then led the group to a pond. On the previous September visit, the pond had been dry and covered by a sea of Nodding Bur-marigold. Following the very wet winter, the pond was still full of water. The management plan for this area involves gradually clearing most of the willows, thereby opening the pond and reed bed to more light. Canada Geese in the gravel pit beyond the pond were behaving very aggressively and making a great deal of noise. The walk continued round the dry stony area. Flowers seen included Mouse-ear Hawkweed, Lesser Stitchwort, Changing Forget-me-not and Lesser Trefoil, while plants identified by their leaves included Pennyroyal, Teasel, Common Bird's-foot Trefoil, Water Mint and the invasive non-native Tree Lupin. Inspection under the remains of a wooden owl box which was lying on the ground revealed a Toad and a Glow-worm larva.

The next part of the walk was along the main trackway through the reserve, with gravel pits on the left and willows on deep silt on the right. The edges of the ride had been cut by contractors. A family of Tufted Ducks, two Little Grebes and a number of Cormorants were seen out on the open water. Some of the Cormorants were perched on bankside trees, with wings spread out to dry. Water Dock plants, with their characteristic giant leaves, were growing in the water at the edge of the pit. In contrast, tiny Blinks plants were spotted down on the track with Greater Bird's-foot Trefoil nearby. Graham led a brief diversion into the willow-covered area to the right of the track to find Skullcap, Remote Sedge, Marsh Bedstraw and Loddon Lily – the latter was a plant which he had introduced to the reserve. The main track led to an open area with long grass where False Fox Sedge, Purple Loosestrife, Ragged-robin and Creeping-Jenny were seen. A Banded Demoiselle and a Common Blue Damselfly perched on vegetation while Mayflies danced overhead. The walkers then turned round and followed the track back to the entrance of the reserve.

Julia Cooper and Ian Duddle organised a visit to Natural England's **Ashford Hill National Nature Reserve** on **Saturday 25 May**. It was a welcome warm and sunny morning, after many cold or wet days. Local volunteer Bob Winfield led the walk, assisted by fellow volunteer Lorraine Cusworth. Most of the

19 members met at the new car park across the road from the local primary school, while a few waited at the track leading up to the reserve entrance. Bob led the group into the reserve. It lies in a valley bottom with the Baughurst Brook running through, on its way to join the River Enborne. The woods to the north of the reserve are on a dry sandy bank and the drainage water from there is acidic. Some of the meadows dry out in the summer and are cut for hay, some are permanently waterlogged and others are managed by grazing. The reserve has been managed for many years by cutting and grazing, with very little or no fertilizer use.

The walk started out through a very wet field. In a pond on the right of the path was a big clump of Greater Tussock-sedge; Water Forget-me-not and Pink Water-speedwell were in flower and Water-plantain was just coming into flower. The path was edged with Meadow Buttercup, Cuckooflower, Red Clover, Gypsywort and Yellow Rattle. A Comma butterfly was spotted on the tangle of bramble on the left of the path. Invertebrates seen near the entrance to the reserve included a Brown China-mark moth, a Long-jawed Orb-weaver spider, a Nettle Weevil, a Hairy Shieldbug and a mating pair of Large Red Damselflies. The path crossed the brook and led into a mostly dry pasture which was full of ant hills made by the Yellow Meadow Ant. The first section of the field was wet, and here Ragged-robin, Creeping-Jenny and Marsh Ragwort were seen. Continuing into the main dry part of the field, Pignut flowers carpeted the grass and Tormentil and Sheep's Sorrel indicated the acid nature of the soil. There were spikes of Germander and Heath Speedwell, plus Lesser Stitchwort, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, Heath Bedstraw and Lady's Bedstraw. Dyer's Greenweed, not yet in flower, was found on top of a few of the anthills. Beneath a Broom bush were the brown spikes of Greater Broomrape. Nearby was a swarm of orchids - Heath Spotted-orchids and Common Spotted-orchids and many hybrids between the two species. Bob then led the group to a particularly wet area on the east side of the field where Water-violet, Wild Angelica, Marsh Thistle, Meadow Thistle and Yellow Iris were found. Returning to a higher and drier part of the field, a Common Blue and two Small Copper butterflies were seen, together with a Silver Y moth. Mother Shipton and Burnet Companion moths were also seen in this field.

The next section of the walk was along a boardwalk which followed the northern bank of the brook eastwards. The stream channel had been deepened, with steep vertical edges. Bob commented that the stream was very shady with no interesting species in the water. Tall multi-stemmed Alders lined the banks. Some of the Alders were dead, having been infected by *Phytophthora alni* for at least 20 years. Sightings from the boardwalk included Yellow Pimpernel, Guelder-rose, Brooklime, Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage, Water Figwort and Bog Stitchwort. Both Banded and Beautiful Demoiselles were observed during the walk. A path to the left of the boardwalk led up to a boggy area where Meadowsweet and Ragged-robin were in flower. A flock of Goldfinches flew across here. The walk continued along the edge of a sunny field where Red Admiral and Speckled Wood butterflies were seen. The field had been rolled in an attempt to reduce the Bracken cover. Bob then led the group across the stream and back along the edge of a field which will be cut for hay when it has dried out. The field was yellow with the flowers of Meadow Buttercup and Yellow-rattle. Many years of the latter as a semi-parasite had reduced the volume of the grass in the hay crop. The path led back to the reserve entrance.

After the morning session, seven members stayed behind for a picnic and another walk around the reserve. First stop was the field across the road from the reserve entrance which is part of the SSSI. Sightings here included two Marsh Stitchwort plants and Tubular Water-dropwort. The group then set off to walk a circuit through Redlands Copse, a wood with coppiced Hazel, Wood Sage and Wood Melick which lies to the north of the reserve and is part of the woodland section of the SSSI. They stopped for a picnic in a clearing off the path where birch had been felled. A pair of Nuthatches flew in and out of their nest in a hole in a nearby tree. The hole size had been reduced by plastering mud across part of the entrance. One of the adult birds was observed removing a faecal sac from the nest. Continuing to the top of the hill, a wasp was seen pollinating a Common Figwort flower. Trailing St John's-wort and

Bog Stitchwort were seen in this part of the walk. The route turned southwards along a farm track. Bees were nesting less than a metre above the ground in a hole in a tree. The next track led south-westwards, with Common Cow-wheat abundant along its edge. It was suggested that it had become established at a time when the location was more shaded. The track then turned south-eastwards, passed a pond and crossed a stream which comes down from Inhurst and is a tributary of Baughurst Brook. There were many blue damselflies and a Broad-bodied Chaser dragonfly flew over the pond. The path continued past a very large Broom bush which was in full flower, and re-entered the reserve at the far end of the field which had been rolled to reduce the Bracken cover. Marsh Valerian is dioecious, with male and female flowers on different plants. Both were found during a more detailed look at the boggy area, together with Marsh Bedstraw, Marsh Speedwell, Ragged-robin, Meadowsweet, Wild Angelica, Square-stalked St John's-wort and Changing Forget-me-not. A female Orange-tip butterfly was seen. The return route crossed the ant-hill pasture. A Common Buzzard flew over Redlands Copse and a Whitethroat was singing.

The Society's annual moth-trapping session, attended by eight, was held on the night of **Friday 14 June / Saturday 15 June** at **Thatcham Reedbeds**. We would particularly like to thank BBOWT's Roger Stace, the Land Manager for the West Berkshire reserves, for his help in the organisation of the event, and for providing a dry set of tables where the catch could be displayed on the Saturday morning. Paul Black brought 3 traps, Norman Hall and Roger Stace each brought 2 traps and Grahame Hawker brought 1 trap. Norman initially set up one of his lights over a sheet, but swapped it for a moth trap when he retired for a brief sleep. Because it was so close to the summer solstice, the hours of darkness were much reduced. It was a cold and windy night with intermittent rain showers – not ideal weather conditions, but typical of the weather for much of the spring. As a result the number of moths caught and the number of different species identified were both low for mid-June.

The first moths to fly in were Snout, Marbled Minor agg and Drinker. (The 'agg' part of the species name is short for 'aggregate'. Marbled Minor, Tawny Marbled Minor and Rufous Minor are very variable moths, separated with certainty only by inspection of the genitalia.) Small Seraphim, Southern Wainscot, Round-winged Muslin, Clouded Border, Pebble Prominent and Small Clouded Brindle were all wetland species. Some had Sallows as the larval foodplant, others had Reed Canary-grass. A Ghost Moth was taken late in the night. It is a species which flies at dawn and dusk and it was a second flight specimen which was taken. Marbled Minor agg, Buff Ermine and Clouded Border were the commonest moths in Paul's trap. Buff Ermine was also the commonest moth in Grahame's moth trap. Apart from moths, many caddis flies were caught. At about midnight, five bees flew into one of Paul's traps.

Next morning, a few members came along to view the catch. Numbers were down, partly because it was cold and raining on and off, and partly because the M4 was closed westbound between Junction 11 and Junction 12, sending large parts of Reading into gridlock. Roger was then able to show the moths in their pots and tubes to the general public. He had saved one of his traps to be opened in front of anyone who was interested.

On **Saturday 22 June** Rob Stallard led a walk round **Bramshill Plantation,** an extensive area of conifer plantations on a former heathland common. It was later used for sand and gravel extraction and is crossed by a network of tracks and paths. It was classified as an SSSI in 1988 and covers 672 hectares. 17 members gathered at the small car park at the south-east corner of the site on an overcast and rather cool morning. The route started briefly northwards before turning to the left through a short stretch of conifer woodland. Amongst the trees on the right hand side of the track was a large anthill (around 1.2m high) with an attendant army of Wood Ants. The whole nest may have as many as

250,000 individuals with one queen or maybe several related queens. An extensive open area then opened up on the right of the track which had been recently replanted following clear-felling. Flowers seen here included Foxgloves, Common Vetch, Common and Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil, Perforate St John's-wort, Common Agrimony and Lesser Stitchwort. The presence of Wood Sage indicated the acid pH of the southern part of the reserve.

The track led to a metalled road, one of the principal arteries across the site. Nail Galls made by the larva of a mite *Eriophyes tiliae* were found in profusion on the leaves of a lime tree. The walk continued westwards until it reached a ride where Goat's-rue was just coming into bloom. Hedge Woundwort, Common Fleabane and Wood Dock were also seen here. By the side of a track leading north, a bare patch of ground where sand and gravel had been stored had an interesting assemblage of flowers, including yellow Biting Stonecrop, Dove's-foot Crane's-bill, Common Centaury, Cut-leaved Crane's-bill and one Bee Orchid. A Marbled White butterfly and a Ringlet butterfly were seen here. The group turned back to continue westwards where there was a double form of Creeping Cinquefoil, together with Smooth Tare, Lesser Hawkbit and Wild Teasel.

At the junction with a north running path Rob gave a brief talk about orchids and how Common Spotted-orchid and Southern Marsh-orchid hybridise on this site. A spectrum of morphological features intermediate between the two parent species was found at several places during the remainder of the walk. The path had a ditch on the right-hand side that had many moisture loving plants including Gypsywort, Hemlock Water-dropwort, Marsh Bedstraw, Hemp Agrimony and Water Figwort. The rarer Fragrant Agrimony was seen and a *Hypericum,* possibly a scarce species or a hybrid, was examined. A Black-and-yellow Longhorn beetle was seen. On the drier side of the path were Heath Speedwell and Red Bartsia. Here and in a number of places the delicate Grass Vetchling plant was discovered by seeing the bright purple single flowers as the leaves look so much like grass. A number of Meadow Brown butterflies were seen, but the highlights were three Emperor Dragonflies patrolling their territory near a ditch.

The path then curved around to the south of a large pool. Here an Emperor dragonfly was seen laying her eggs on vegetation at the water surface. A Reed Warbler was heard, and two more Bee Orchids were seen. The route turned east along a wide path. Here Slender St John's-wort was in bud as well as Dewberry and Brooklime. Following a narrow path south the route approached another pond. A continuous chorus of whirring and grating sounds which gradually increased in volume turned out to be coming from the population of Marsh Frogs *Pelophylax ridibundus* which live in a medium-sized pond on the left of the track. They were hidden amongst the vegetation and were hard to spot – there was just the plopping sound as they dived down into the water if anyone approached too closely. They are Europe's largest frog, released in Kent in the 1930s and spread from there with some intentional dumping of unwanted pets. The pool had a large area covered with Water Purslane. The next section of the route followed a narrow twisting path through a conifer plantation. Lesser Spearwort and Gypsywort were found at a damp section of the path. Among the gorse bushes was a Straw Dot moth. As the narrow path reached another pond, a row of crab apple trees were weighed down by fruit.

The path then joined one of the main tracks running roughly north-south. In the ditch between two parallel paths Hemp Agrimony and Dotted Loosestrife were spotted. On the eastern ditch of the track more hybrids of Common Spotted-orchid and Southern Marsh-orchid were seen. A path eastward was taken where there were more hybrid orchids and also a dozen Pyramidal Orchids. The slightly higher ground had a number of Meadow Brown butterflies as well as a Common Blue butterfly nectaring on Common Bird's-foot-trefoil. The yellow flowers of Meadow Vetchling were also seen here. The path narrowed and entered a conifer plantation before reaching another major track running south-west under pylons back to the car park. In the slightly damp conditions here a Common Frog was seen as well as areas covered with Heath Bedstraw. It had been hoped that the rare semi-parasitic plant Yellow

Bartsia would be found. It had previously been seen at various places along the chosen route but was not found on the day. As it is an annual plant it will hopefully crop up again, especially on disturbed ground.

John Lerpiniere led a walk round **Paices Wood Country Park**, at the back of Young's Industrial Estate near AWE Aldermaston, on the morning of **Saturday 6 July**. It had been advertised as a butterfly walk with White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary as the principal targets, but low temperatures, a strong wind and intermittent showers meant that the target woodland butterfly species were not flying. Nevertheless, 13 hardy members turned out regardless and had an interesting walk, learning about the management of the site and seeing the best spots for butterflies in more suitable weather conditions. Meeting point was the main car park, an extensive area of closely-mown grass between the sixth and seventh lakes of a chain which runs down through the country park. A Pied Wagtail was seen here. John set off downhill across the grass to the edge of the woodland, where a path led down steps into the woods. It was edged with tall Great Horsetail plants. He pointed out the location of wet Alder woodland to the right of the path which we would not be visiting on this occasion.

The path crossed a stream, then led up into an area of Sweet Chestnut coppice. Brooklime, Enchanter's Nightshade and Male Fern were noted here. Turning left onto the next path, John pointed out the cocoon of a leaf-rolling weevil which dangled from a branch of a Hazel. Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil, Marsh Thistle, Creeping-Jenny and Agrimony were all found in flower. Areas which had recently been coppiced were fenced in to prevent deer damage. John compared the sizes of re-grown Hazels in plots where the fencing had worked and one which had not been successful in keeping the Muntjac deer out. Continuing uphill, John pointed out Honeysuckle, the food plant of the White Admiral caterpillars. He explained that the females prefer to lay their eggs on straggly older plants which carry less toxins than more vigorous younger plants. A few Orpine plants were found next to the path. A big wood bank marked the edge of an old drovers road which ran from Aldermaston up to Brimpton Common. Growing on the bank were a number of old multi-stemmed trees, including some large Field Maples. A coppiced oak next to the path was an unusual sighting – oak is not usually coppiced. A clearing opened up on the left of the path. John checked under a metal sheet near the entrance to the clearing and the group were delighted to find an adult Grass Snake sheltering there. A White-legged Damselfly perched on Bracken nearby.

There followed a brief diversion into the open area. Common Fleabane was close to flowering, while Perforate St John's-wort, Teasel, Bramble and Red Bartsia were already in flower. The glade is a good place to see White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary butterflies. A fresh-looking Ringlet was disturbed. The contrasting white border round its dark wings was clearly visible in flight. In the past, Drab Looper moths have been seen here in late spring, with Wood Spurge as the caterpillar food-plant. Wild Parsnip, a serious skin irritant, was abundant here. The walk continued through an area dominated by birch, willow and alder, a former gravel extraction site. The group then turned left along a ride which led towards the chain of lakes. John recounted that in the past, when the ride-side sallows had been smaller, male Purple Emperor butterflies had congregated here. On the right of the path was an abandoned wildlife pond where pond-dipping sessions used to take place. Plants seen here included Water-plantain, Water Mint, Yellow Flag, Purple Loosestrife and Marsh Thistle. At the top of the Country Park is an extensive area of Heather which appeared when the area was cleared.

The route then led back to the chain of lakes, over the dam and up to the top car park. This is an open stony area where all sorts of soil have been dumped. Flowers seen here included Common Centaury, Buddleia, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, Bristly Oxtongue and both pink and white flowered specimens of Musk-mallow. Plants identified by their leaves included Great Mullein and Weld. Gradually the clouds thinned and butterflies started to fly. These included Marbled White, Meadow Brown and Ringlet. In late spring, this is a good site for Grizzled and Dingy Skipper. The top car park area is bounded

on one side by the industrial estate. The bank next to the fence around the industrial estate proved to be an interesting area. Cinnabar moth caterpillars were feeding on ragwort, an Azure Damselfly and two Gatekeepers were spotted and the stem and seed pods of a Bee Orchid which had finished flowering were found. The group then walked back along the road to the main car park.

Inge Beck led a walk to BBOWT's **Yoesden Bank** reserve near Bledlow Ridge (in the Chilterns between High Wycombe and Princes Risborough) on the morning of **Saturday 20 July**. It was a mild but cloudy morning. Meeting point for the 17 participants was the Village Hall car park. After a short walk north-westwards along Chinnor Road, the route turned left and followed a narrow footpath towards the reserve. The footpath led to an area of tall scrub, where Upright Hedge-parsley, Hairy St John's-wort, Hedge Woundwort, Nettle-leaved Bellflower, Field Scabious and Red Bartsia were all in flower. Inge led the group through a gap in the scrub and into the adjacent field which was very colourful, with a carpet of wild flowers including purple Selfheal, pink Pyramidal Orchids, yellow and orange Common Bird's-foot-trefoil and blue Small Scabious and Harebell. Also seen were Wild Basil, Marjoram, Greater Knapweed, Eyebright, Fairy Flax, Common Milkwort, Yellow-wort, Rough Hawkbit, Restharrow, Carline Thistle, Wild and Large Thyme, Common Rock-rose, Devil's-bit Scabious and Salad Burnet. A number of butterflies were on the wing, including Marbled White, Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper, Small Heath and Small Skipper. Some members of the group followed a path along the bottom of the woods in order to see several Small Teasel plants. Also seen here was a Great Green Bush-cricket, a large insect whose green colouring was an exact match of the surrounding vegetation.

The walk continued into the next field, which was a recent addition to the reserve. Two rectangular areas had been scraped bare. Dark Mullein was found in one scrape and Small Toadflax was an exciting find in the other. Inge then took a small group across the valley to the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin in Radnage. It was built in the late 12th or early 13th century by the Knights Templar and is decorated with wall paintings. Inside were flower arrangements which had been made with wild flowers and grasses. One included Bramble and Marsh Thistle amongst its components. The remaining members explored the new field. It was possible to compare Common Knapweed and Greater Knapweed; more Great Green Bush-crickets were scrambling through the vegetation and Kidney Vetch and Dwarf Thistle were added to the species tally. In the grey and cloudy conditions, the butterflies were less flighty than they would have been in sunshine. It was possible to inspect the antennae of the small orange skippers and most of them appeared to be Essex Skippers rather than Small Skippers. There were a number of Six-spot Burnet moths. A Buzzard was feeding young in a tree on the other side of the valley. The path across the next field ran along the sloping Chalk bank of the main part of the reserve. New species added here included Hoary Ragwort, Wild Carrot, Burnet-saxifrage and Quaking Grass. Along one stretch were many spikes of orchid seed heads. Some still showed a few faded flowers of Common Spotted-orchid. Apparently earlier in the season there had also been Chalk Fragrant Orchids here.

Further on, the path ran through a stretch where there were many Gentian spikes. Most of these were still in bud, but a few were already flowering. They were likely to be Autumn or Chiltern Gentians or hybrids between the two species. One of the methods of telling the two species apart is to count the number of internodes (the sections of stem between the points at which the leaves are attached). For Autumn Gentian, the stems should have 5-9 internodes, while for Chiltern Gentians there should be 9-15 internodes. Unfortunately, all the specimens tested appeared to have the ambiguous 9 internodes, so we were still none the wiser as to their exact identity. Other members of the group also looked at the corolla length relative to the calyx on a couple of specimens with open flowers and thought one was Autumn Gentian and the other was a hybrid. With fewer than 9 internodes, they could not be pure Chiltern Gentian. A Muntjac deer was seen at the bottom of the slope and a Yellowhammer was heard. A footpath led from the far end of the reserve up to the Chinnor Road. Then, turning right, there was a short stretch of road back to the car park. Inge then showed the John Piper window in St Paul's Church, Bledlow Ridge to some of the members.

Volunteer warden **Mick Jones** led a walk in cloudy conditions round BBOWT's **Dancers End** reserve, near Tring, on the afternoon of Saturday 10 August. Nine members gathered by the ornate Victorian pumping station. A volunteers' room within the pumping station buildings had a collection of historical pictures of the reserve, with information about former owner Charles Rothschild who was a founder member of the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves. The walk then started out through a permit-only area within a former quarry. Flowers seen here included Wild Angelica, Red Bartsia, Greater Knapweed, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, Eyebright and Clustered Bellflower, and a Common Blue butterfly was seen. The invasive Wood Small-reed threatens to take over this area, so small patches are regularly scraped bare and seeds of plants such as Kidney Vetch are scattered for the Small Blue butterfly. Other plants seen in this area included Common Centaury, Common Milkwort, Small Scabious, Yellow-wort and Harebell. In sunnier conditions, it is a good place to see Small Skipper butterflies. There were many Chiltern Gentians in flower here. Continuing through the quarry area, Small Toadflax was found on a bare scrape, with Common Gromwell nearby and both pink and white varieties of Musk-mallow were seen. A Large Skipper butterfly and a Kentish Snail *Monacha cantiana* were identified. The Kentish Snail was probably introduced in Roman times and is now very common throughout England but less common in Scotland and Wales. It usually climbs vegetation and may occur in very large numbers. A Figwort plant turned out to be Water Figwort, marking the damp conditions of a seepage area.

The walk continued through an orchard which had been planted up with a selection of local varieties of fruit trees, including the Aylesbury prune, which was grown commercially. A big old pear had rounded fruits like an apple, more closely resembling a Wild Pear. Mick pointed out a Ramshorn Gall on an oak tree, caused by the wasp *Andrious aries*. The route then led through a gate, over the lane and up through a steep area of woodland. A big Deadly Nightshade plant was covered in flowers. Also seen near here were Nettle-leaved Bellflower, Wood Spurge and Spurge-Laurel. Mick told the group that where fallen trees had accumulated leaves on their up-slope sides, there had been good numbers of Collared Earth-star fungi. The woodland had been clear-felled during World War II. In the following 7-8 years when the area was open and covered in scrub, there had been records of Woodlark, Nightingale and High Brown Fritillary. The Forestry Commission had then replanted with conifers, plus some Beech and areas of Hazel coppice to be cut on rotation.

As the walk continued uphill, the underlying geology changed from Chalk to the more acid Clay-with-flints. This was favoured by the Foxgloves. There were Badger workings here, which from time to time turn up echinoid fossils. The track led to a crossroads, a good place to see Silver-washed Fritillaries and Purple Hairstreaks on sunnier days. Wood Sage, which was found here for the first time a few years ago, is a rarity in the Chilterns. It may have been brought in on the boot of a contractor. A ditch and bank outlined a cleared area – an 'assart', where the woodland had been cleared in the 16th or 17th century. Old Crab Apple trees mark the corners of the plot. Yellow Pimpernel was seen here. A Common Hemp-nettle plant was flowering at the side of the ride, which led downhill to a clearing with a distant view across to Ivanhoe Beacon. Wood Vetch was in flower beside the ride, at its only Buckinghamshire site. A Brimstone was seen nearby nectaring on Marjoram.

The track led to the meadow area where Miriam Rothschild experimented with different grazing and scrub-clearing regimes. When myxomatosis devastated the rabbit population in the 1950s and 1960s, open areas with precious chalk grassland became covered in scrub. It was found that Dogwood cut in winter produced suckers and it could be managed better by cutting in July. The meadows have a population of Greater Butterfly-orchids and Meadow Clary at its only natural site in Buckinghamshire. The route then led back by different tracks towards the starting point. The sun came out and a Comma and a Meadow Brown took to the wing. Mick pointed out rolled Hazel leaves made by the Hazel Roller weevil. The track led steeply uphill. Where it passed Clay patches which retained water, plants such as

Wild Angelica and Water Mint could be seen. White-letter Hairstreaks are to be found on a Wych Elm here. Finally, the track led back to the car park and the water works.

Alan Holmes led a well-attended dragonfly walk at **50 Acre Piece** near **Padworth Common** on the morning of **Saturday 17 August**. The sun was shining, but there was a cool breeze, so many of the dragonflies were perching rather than flying, which gave members more time to locate and inspect them. The heathland site is an area of former gravel extraction with a number of large shallow pools. There are no obvious tracks across the site and so far, it has escaped the notice of the dog walkers. As a result, the water is clear and not stirred up. Members parked on the verge at the side of Silver Lane, then crossed Burghfield Road to enter 50 Acre Piece at its north-west corner. One of the early sightings was a Grayling butterfly, the first of a total of 14 which were counted during the morning. A male Emperor Dragonfly was patrolling round the first pond. It is a large dragonfly with a green thorax and blue abdomen. A specimen was photographed down on the ground on a large pale stone. A male Black-tailed Skimmer had a blue abdomen with a black tip. An Emerald Damselfly was perching on poolside vegetation with its wings held half open, while perching nearby was a male Common Darter, with a red abdomen. A female Emperor Dragonfly was ovipositing in floating vegetation out in the open water of the pond.

One of the morning's targets was our smallest true dragonfly, the Black Darter. This is a species which is declining nationally, but which appears to be bucking the trend and doing well at 50 Acre Piece. A male Black Darter was perching on bankside vegetation and had black wing spots, completely black legs and yellow stripes on the abdomen. A Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly was another target species and one was captured in a photograph while perching on bankside vegetation. For male Scarce Blue-tailed Damselflies, all of segment 9 is blue, but only part of segment 8 is blue. For the male of the more common Blue-tailed Damselfly, all of section 8 is blue and all of section 9 is black. (Segment 1 of the abdomen is closest to the thorax, while segment 9 is furthest away from the thorax.) A female Emerald Damselfly had a thicker abdomen than the male. A mating pair of Small Red Damselflies in the characteristic wheel position was seen. This species is restricted to mires, heathland and bogs in southern England and Wales. It has red eyes and legs. A Brown Hawker was being chased off by an Emperor.

The site has four main pools, connected by a network of channels. The route led southwards along the western edge of the pools, then back along the eastern side. A Buzzard family drifted overhead and the call of a Raven was heard. One member who sat quietly on a log was rewarded with the sight of a swimming Grass Snake which was about 2 feet long. Strange underground trails were outlined by lines and junctions of yellowish sand. They were thought to have been made by the ant *Tapinoma erraticum*. All three types of heather were seen – Cross-leaved Heath, Bell Heather and Heather *Calluna vulgaris*. Other plants seen included Water Purslane, Floating Clubrush, Creeping Willow with the gall *Rabdophaga salicis* and Heath Groundsel. A young toadlet was seen and a Lizard scuttled away into the surrounding vegetation. Towards the end of the walk, a Kite-tailed Robber-fly *Tolmerus atricapillus* landed on one of the walkers.

Julia Cooper and Ian Duddle led 18 members on a walk round **Bartley Heath**, a reserve of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust (HIOWWT), on the afternoon of **Sunday 1 September**. It was a hot and sunny day, with the temperature in the high twenties. The reserve is on common land, between Hook and the M3. Starting from the reserve car park, the route led left through woodland, before coming to a more open glade. Flowers here included Common Fleabane, Tormentil, Common Agrimony, Common Knapweed and Square-stalked St John's-wort. The glade led onto a damper area with Lesser Spearwort, Betony and Marsh Thistle. A Wasp Spider was spotted amongst the vegetation and a European Hornet flew among the trees, with a sturdy Orange Birch Bolete below. The open heathland beyond was a sea of yellow and pink, with the yellow coming from Dwarf Gorse and the

pink mainly from Heather *Calluna vulgaris.* The other two species of heather were also present, with Bell Heather on the drier parts and Cross-leaved Heath on the wetter areas.

Pylons stride across the reserve. The cleared area beneath them is the best place to find the more unusual plants, particularly Marsh Gentian, the principal target for the afternoon. With their deep blue colour and large flower heads, they were easy to spot and there were good numbers of them on the heathland. A single flower-head can have up to 15 individual flowers, but seven was the maximum counted at Bartley Heath. Devil's-bit Scabious, Tormentil and Creeping Willow were also widespread. A few straggly plants of Petty Whin were found around the base of a pylon, one with a few seed pods. Some of the gorse bushes were draped in spiders' webs. These were made by the Nursery Web Spider *Pisaura mirabilis*. An adult specimen was photographed. The walk continued to the eastern edge of the heathland. There was no sign of the single plant of Saw-wort which was found there on the pre-walk. A long fallen trunk offered a shady seat for a cold drink and a dozen members were soon lined up in the shade. Near the fallen tree were a number of small pits where gravel had been extracted by the commoners. These contained varying amounts of water. Plants found here included the tiny Lesser Skullcap, Bog Pimpernel, Marsh St John's-wort, Marsh Speedwell and a single flower head of Sneezewort. A Red Darter dragonfly alternately flew and perched around the wet pits. Butterflies seen included Gatekeeper, Small Heath and Speckled Wood, and several Straw Dot moths were also seen.

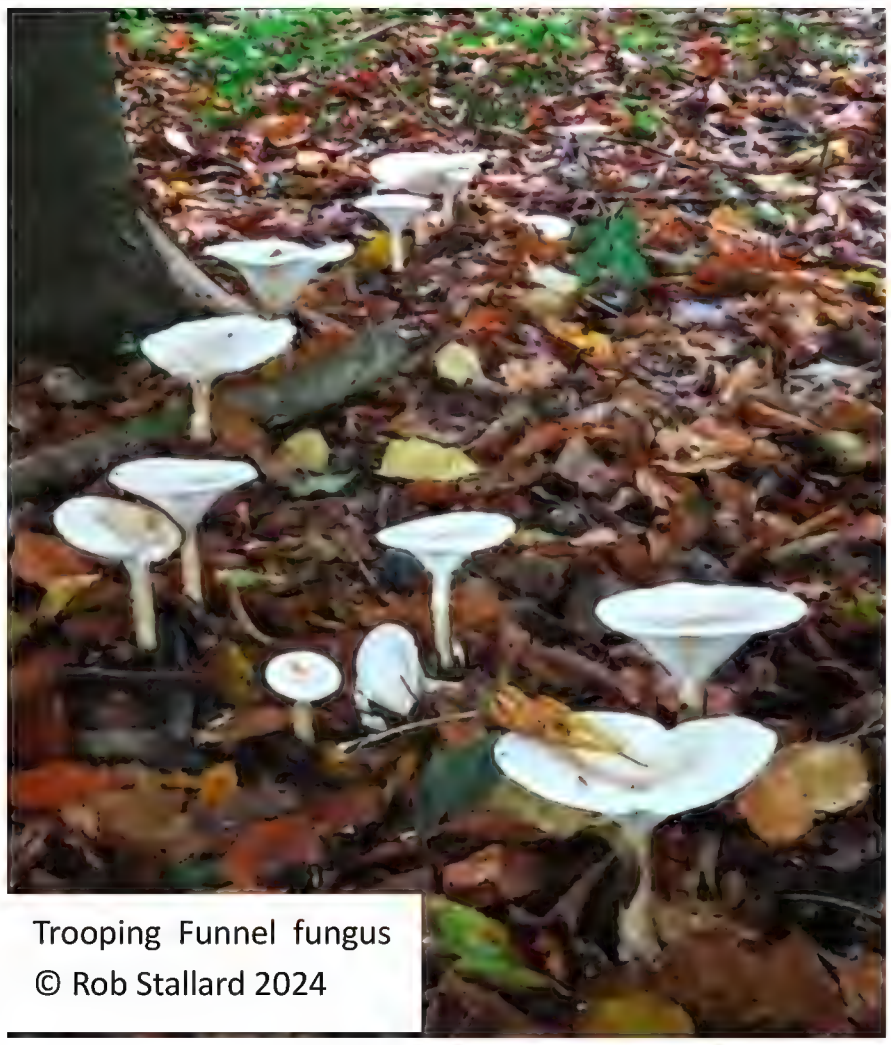
The walk continued through a stretch of woodland where a Roe Deer and fawn were glimpsed among the trees, and out onto another open area of heathland. Three more Sneezewort plants were found. Members were surprised to see a fast food delivery person carrying a box of his wares along the woodland path. Apparently a work party had been hard at work nearby. Not long after, cheers were heard, celebrating the safe delivery of their supplies. Another path led back through the woodland. In a damp area Water-starwort was growing beneath a bridge, with Water-purslane in a small pond, and froglets were spotted in the grass. Heading across the heath towards the start, a Red Admiral was flying, and near the car park Yellow Pimpernel was growing by the side of the path. Before leaving, some members walked down the old road to an oak tree with bramble below, where Purple Hairstreak butterflies can often be seen in summer. A different flora, including Common Figwort and Creeping-Jenny could be seen by the side of the road. Several of the photographers were keen to get pictures of other invertebrates. Their targets included a collection of spiders, grasshoppers, bugs, mirid bugs, flies, dragonflies, butterflies and moths and galls.

Andy Bolton led a walk round **Wildmoor**, to the north-east of Basingstoke, on the afternoon of **Sunday 22 September**. There had been copious amounts of rain in the preceding 24 hours and the forecast was for more to come. But the forecast had been unduly pessimistic, because apart from some light drizzle and a single brief shower, the afternoon remained dry. Eight members started out eastwards from a bend on Wildmoor Lane, heading first along a lane towards Wildmoor Farm, then along a footpath next to a deep gulley with Hart's-tongue Ferns and Shield-ferns. The footpath led to a bridge over the River Loddon, which at this point was clear and fast-flowing. Bright green water plants on the river bed could be clearly seen. Water Mint and Water Forget-me-not were both in flower here. The walk continued along another footpath which followed the river bank southwards. A Kestrel flew overhead and later a lucky few had a glimpse of a Kingfisher. Andy pointed out that the river was black and peaty along this section and no water plants could be seen below the surface. Plants growing on the river bank included Wild Angelica, Marsh Woundwort, Water Figwort, Brooklime, Common Fleabane, Amphibious Bistort and Gypsywort. A Migrant Hawker dragonfly patrolled along the river bank and a Banded Demoiselle was seen. Green-veined White butterflies which had been resting by the path took to the wing. A Burnished Brass moth was spotted by the path, with a large frog nearby. Two Herons drifted down the valley. A Scorpion Fly *Panorpa germanica* was photographed on nettles by the river bank.

The path crossed the river again, and this time the water was clear as it flowed over gravel. There followed a high and rickety stile, the first of several on the walk. Further on, the path skirted a field of maize, where there were a selection of arable weeds, including Field Madder, Fumitory, Musk-mallow, Sun Spurge, Scarlet Pimpernel and Black Bindweed. A Nettle-tap moth was identified, a party of Long-tailed Tits fluttered through the hedge and a Green Woodpecker flew up. The hedge to the left of the path was laden with berries, including Guelder-rose, Spindle and Black Bryony. An area to the right of the path looked as if it had been planted with a seed mix for birds, with various unidentified grains. There were several Small White butterflies and a Red Admiral was also seen nearby. A Chiffchaff and a Raven called and there were flowers of Dwarf Mallow and Chicory. After crossing the river again, a hedge bordering the path had Hops scrambling through it. A Dark Bush-cricket was spotted on a Hazel leaf. The footpath ran past the back of the sewage farm. Then the tall, narrow, windowless building of the Chineham incinerator came into view. The footpath continued to a track bordered on one side by woodland. A hawker dragonfly patrolled up and down. Everyone waited patiently for the hawker to stop and perch, so that it could be identified – but it refused to cooperate and kept flying. It was agreed that it was most likely to be a Migrant Hawker. A Great Spotted Woodpecker flew up from the ground. The track led to a bridge where a Tree Slug was found on one of the wooden railings. As its name implies, this common slug is often seen climbing trees. The tracks then led back to Wildmoor Lane and a short stretch of road led back to the parked cars.

David Owens led a walk round the northern section of **Sulham Woods** on the morning of **Sunday 20 October**. It was raining a little, but not as much as most of the forecasts had predicted. The first named storm of the season, Storm Ashley, was out to the west and had gale force winds associated with it. 11 members gathered at the western end of Beech Road in Purley before setting off up the public footpath towards Sulham Woods. David distributed sheets with pictures of different classes of fungi (*Basidiomycetes* and *Ascomycetes*) and slime moulds (*Myxomycetes*). The path led through a small stretch of woodland, where sightings included Hairy Curtain Crust *Stereum hirsutum,* Yellowing Curtain Crust *S. subtomentosum* and Burgundydrop Bonnet *Mycena haematopus*. Jelly Ear *Auricularia auricula-judae* was growing up a dead Elm. Next to the woodland edge was a new stock-proof fence. The field beyond was being grazed by a small herd of cattle and a single Roe Deer. It is part of the Sulham Woodmeadows scheme. The field, which is on Plateau Gravel, was formerly used to grow arable crops, but it was poor soil and full of flints and the farmer thought that he had probably been cultivating it at a loss. Instead, it is being converted to more nature-friendly use. If, as expected, a market in biodiversity capital is developed, then the Woodmeadows land will be able to provide Biodiversity Units for sale. The section which was being inspected had been seeded earlier in the year with a grass and wildflower mix. Several large Black Nightshade plants were growing next to the path. Other plants growing nearby included Field Pansy, Wild Basil, Common Knapweed, Smooth Hawksbeard, Common Sorrel, Devil's-bit Scabious and Black Medick.

The path led into Mosshall Wood, the northernmost section of Sulham Woods. The first part of the wood is dominated by Beech and the ground was carpeted with a rich tapestry of red and orange leaves. There are two big chalk pits. A fallen Beech tree was leaning out over one of the chalk pits. At its end were tufts of gleaming white, slimy Porcelain Fungus *Oudemansiella mucida*. A slime mould, made up of tiny yellow spheres, was growing on dead wood. Jim Wills demonstrated how the skin of the cap of the Peeling Oysterling *Crepidotus mollis* was elastic and could be peeled away from the rest of the cap. The walk continued through a section of the wood which was dominated by dead Ash and on to the north-west corner of Mosshall Wood, a further section of Beech wood. A number of Helleborine seed heads were found down amongst the leaf litter, and there was some debate as to whether these were Broad-leaved or Narrow-lipped Helleborines. Continuing along the path, the next



Trooping Funnel fungus
© Rob Stallard 2024

stop was to admire several long lines of the large Trooping Funnel fungus *Clitocybe geotropa*. Other specimens nearby included a Deceiver *Laccaria laccata*, King Alfred's Cakes *Daldinia concentrica* on Ash, a gleaming white and slimy Ivory Woodwax *Hygrophorus eburneus* on soil, Turkeytail *Trametes versicolor* and a Lumpy Bracket *T. gibbosa*.

As the group moved on, there was a loud cracking noise ahead and to the left and a dead branch came crashing down. Strong gusts of wind triggered a blizzard of falling leaves. A Magpie Inkcap *Coprinopsis picacea* which was well past its best was spotted at the end of a log. At the top of its long stem, its cap had rolled back into a black inky mess. Half way along the fallen log was a younger specimen, not yet fully unrolled. The route continued along the track which follows the line of Chalk and Beechwood until it was crossed by a footpath which climbed up through the conifer plantation which is to be found above the Chalk. Spiny Puffball *Lycoperdon echinatum* and Bush Vetch were seen here. The footpath passes through a gateway and emerges in the field above the woods. In the gateway were a number of specimens of Coral Fungus. This field is also part of the Sulham Woodmeadows scheme. The stock fencing on either side of the footpath was much higher here than on the fence near the start of the walk. It is deer-proof fencing because a lot of trees and shrubs will be planted in the section closest to the woods. It will be laid out in a scalloped fashion, creating sunny and sheltered conditions for butterflies and other invertebrates.

A line of trees hides the next path which leads back to Mosshall Wood. There are many Field Maples in the strip of woodland and their fallen leaves were predominantly yellow and green, in contrast to the reds and oranges of the Beech leaves which had been seen earlier. Another slime mould was seen here, this time with little orange spheres. The next path led eastwards along the southern boundary of Mosshall Wood. There were several clumps of Butcher's-broom with bright red berries and a Yellow Stainer *Agaricus xanthodermus* was found nearby. The wind got up again and there was the alarming sound of another tree falling, somewhere deeper in Mosshall Wood. It did not feel safe and the priority was to leave the wooded area as quickly as possible. The new deer-proof fencing prevented an immediate exit from the wood, but the path hugged the edge of the wood until it emerged in the open fields on the eastern side of the woods. The route then led back to Beech Road.

Sue White led a walk round the Roman walls at **Silchester** on the morning of **Saturday 30 November**. It was a mild, damp, dull day with grey cloud cover. 12 members gathered in the official English Heritage car park off Wall Lane. From there, a footpath led to the Roman walls.

A male Kestrel, with grey head and chestnut back, was perched at the top of a tree which overhung the footpath. The route led clockwise round the walls, starting out along the north wall of the Roman town. Volunteers had been clearing brambles and scrub from in front of the walls. They were cutting the brambles back to about a foot above the ground, creating a trip hazard which would discourage people from going too close to the walls. A member had asked us to check if we thought they were damaging the walls and their associated wildlife. The consensus of the group was that they were improving things. Turning into the north gateway, members were able to inspect closely fragments of the original wall. Lime mortar had been used. Flints would have been used as a filler material. Mosses on the wall included Silky Wall Feather-moss *Homalothecium sericeum,* Common Feather-moss *Kindbergia praelonga* and Cylindric Beard-moss *Didymodon insulanus.* A few of the flints which had been incorporated in the wall were a reddish-brown colour, caused by burning. The Kestrel which had been following the group round perched on a telegraph pole which overlooked the north gateway. Also seen here were a Buzzard perching in a tree and a Pied Wagtail. Other birds noted near the north wall were a Grey Wagtail and a calling Raven. Continuing along the north wall, flowering plants included Great Mullein, Hedge Mustard, Musk-mallow, Field Scabious and Blue Fleabane. Marsh Thistle was in flower in the field to the north of the wall. Back up at the top of the wall, a massive old Ash tree was growing with its roots tangled into the wall.

Next stop was the Roman amphitheatre at the north-east corner of the site. A member with a good memory recalled that Three-cornered Leek had been seen here on a previous visit. It appeared to be spreading rampantly above the far side of the amphitheatre. The walk continued along Wall Lane to the church of St. Mary the Virgin. The church walls were inspected for Roman era stones. Layers of thin Roman-period tiles were spotted at one repair site and thin Roman bricks had been used at another site. The walk continued round the southern section of the walls. Volunteers had just cleared the path from the church to the walls, so members were the first to benefit from the newly cleared section. A stream which drained the Roman town ran under the wall. Not far upstream there had been Roman baths with hypocaust etc. The route ran on top of the south-facing wall. The small fern Wall Rue was spotted in this section, together with a spleenwort, Pellitory-of-the-wall, Upright Hedge-parsley and Mouse-ear Hawkweed.

At the next gateway, the route crossed to the outer side of wall, which looked much higher than the inside, where the group had been walking before. The western side of the walls ran through a strip of woodland. Here one of the botanical highlights of the morning, Small Teasel, was found. There were a number of plants between the path and the walls. Most had seed heads, but a few still had small flower clusters. Nettle-leaved Bellflower was also found in flower here and Soft Shield-fern was seen. This section of the walls was draped in Ivy, apart from one small area, where a big patch of Navelwort was growing on the wall. A Nuthatch was heard calling here. The walkers completed their circuit of the walls and the final path led back to the car park.

Photographic Competition 2024 Winning Photographs

Overall Winner and Winner: Something to make you Smile Jay's bath time
Reading Garden © Tom Walker

Winner: **Pattern Perfect** & Overall Runner Up
Merveille du Jour moth, Brimpton Common
© Grahame Hawker

Winner: **Three of a kind** Avocets
Slimbridge WWT © Lesley Hawker

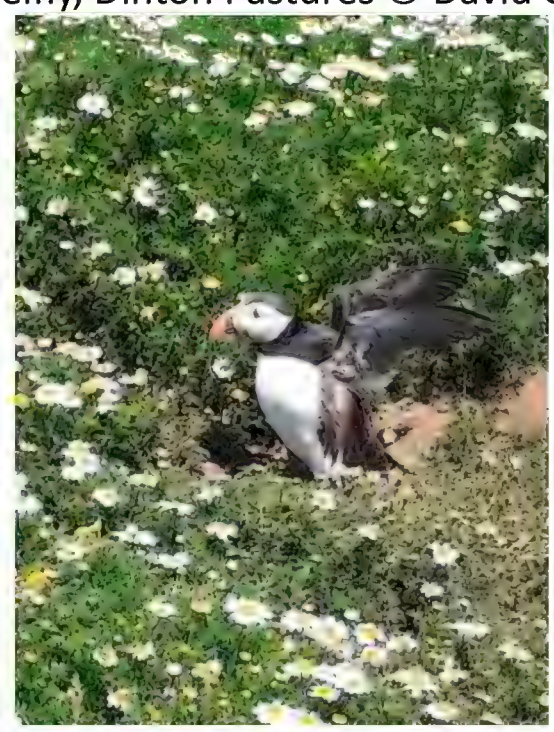
Winner: **Nature In Action** Crow chasing a Marsh Harrier, Yorkshire © Fiona Brown

Winner: **Colour Carnival** Vapourer Caterpillar River Kennet, Southcote © Tom Walker

Winner: **Small is Beautiful** Jersey Tiger moth Reading Garden © Tom Walker

Winner: **Nature on your Doorstep** Common Blue Damselfly, Dinton Pastures © David Owens

Winner: **Any Flora or Fungi** Seaside flora Rustington, West Sussex © Grahame Hawker

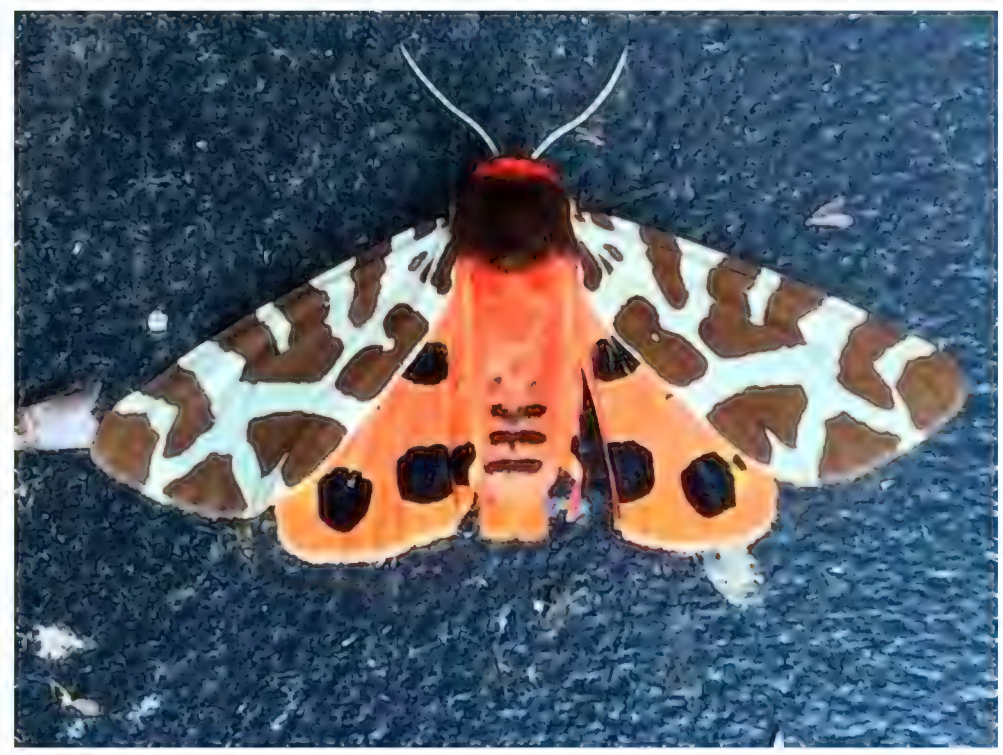


Winner: **Any Fauna** Puffin Skomer Island, Pembrokeshire © Lesley Hawker

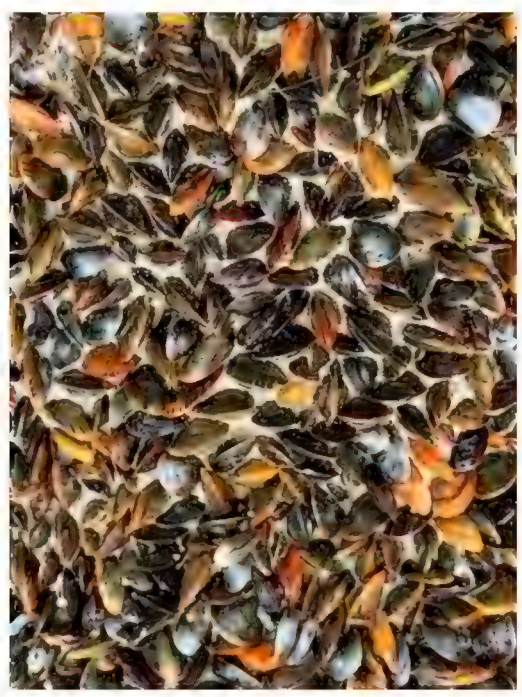
Runner Up: **Small is Beautiful** Swollen-thighed Beetle, Stoney Heath, Hampshire © Lesley Hawker

Runner Up: **Nature in Action** Common Blue Butterflies, Hartslock, Oxon © Rob Stallard

Joint Runner Up: **Colour Carnival** Forester moth on Ragwort, South Oxfordshire © Fiona Cummins



Joint Runner Up: **Colour Carnival** Garden Tiger moth Sea Palling, Norfolk © Grahame Hawker



Runner Up: **Pattern Perfect** Common Edible Mussels, South Wales © Steve Woolnough

Runner Up: **Something to make you Smile** Woodpigeon feeding young, Sea Palling, © L. Hawker

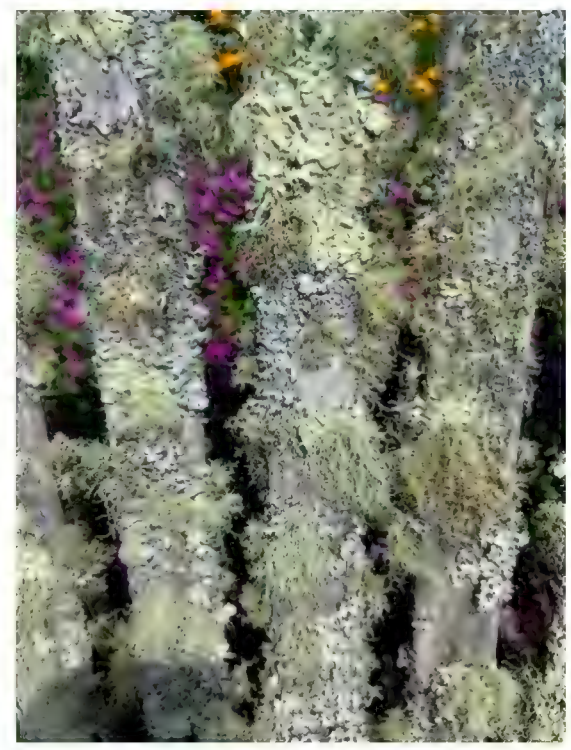
Joint Runner Up: **Any Fauna** Roe Deer
Aston Tirrold © Rob Stallard

Joint Runner Up: **Any Fauna** Monitor Lizard
Thailand © David Owens

Joint Runner Up: **Nature on your Doorstep**
Siskins, Pangbourne garden © Dorothy Marshall

Joint Runner Up: **Nature on your Doorstep**
Scarlet Tiger moth, Brimpton Common © L.Hawker

Runner Up: **Three of a Kind** Rooks
Slimbridge WWT © Grahame Hawker



Runner Up: **Any Flora or Fungi** Lichens on a bench
Tresco, Isles of Scilly © Jenny Greenham

Mid-week Walks 2024

by **Jan Haseler, Julia Cooper and Rob Stallard**

The first mid-week walk of 2024 was at **Earley** on **Wednesday 17 January** and was led by John Sharpe. It was a cold morning, with the temperature just above freezing. 15 members met at Sol Joel park, next door to St Peter's Church. John gave a brief history of the area and described its geology. It is the highest point in the area and lies on London Clay. While members were assembling, a flock of Redwings were flying in and out of the red berry-bearing tree next to the car park. First stop on the walk was the graveyard of St Peter's Church, where Red Dead-nettle, Canadian Fleabane and Ragwort were all in flower. Leaves of Oxeye Daisy, a sedum and Bluebells were noted, one of the Earth-star fungi was found and a Robin sang from one of the churchyard trees.

Turning right into Church Road, the route led across the bridge over the railway line and the busy A3290 dual carriageway, then turned right immediately to get to the allotments which occupy the strip of land next to the dual carriageway. Nipplewort was found in flower and the leaves of Bucks-horn Plantain were spotted down on the path. There were piles of wood-chippings next to the main track through the allotments. A Splitgill fungus was found on a stump next to the wood-chippings. Nearby was a tree which had rotted down and John picked up a handful of dark, crumbly material which he claimed made excellent seed compost. The Wokingham Ancient Tree Forum have logged a number of veteran oaks on the allotment site. John then led the group to his own allotment, which is situated at the furthest, lowest end of the site. He has been growing crops organically here for 30 years. A network of channels has been dug to try to solve the drainage problems. A bed had recently been planted with field beans, which he and his family prefer to broad beans. These do not have any problems with aphids because there are plenty of ladybirds when necessary. The plot also has fruit trees and fruit bushes. The leaf rosette of a Spear Thistle was identified, Germander Speedwell was found in flower and a Jay flew across a neighbouring plot. Continuing round the outer edge of the allotments, two Goldfinches flew onto seed heads of Evening Primrose and Teasel. The track then turned to the left, following the edge of the site alongside the adjacent woodland area. A singing Song Thrush and several Great Tits were heard. Down on the path, Parsley-piert, Shining Crane's-bill and Bristly Oxtongue were seen.

After emerging from the allotments, John led the group into High Wood, a local nature reserve which is maintained by the Wokingham Countryside Service. He told members how Coastal Redwoods had been planted here in the 19th Century. Six of these have been allowed to grow unhindered. The remaining 40-odd specimens were cut back and are now very big multi-stemmed trees. A small Holm Oak was identified. There were still plenty of berries on the Holly bushes. A narrow gate led through into an area of open heathland. A team of volunteers had been cutting down invading trees and were burning them on a bonfire. Both Heather *Calluna vulgaris* and Cross-leaved Heath were found. There were a number of molehills. Leaves of Sheep's Sorrel were found on an anthill. Also seen were Broom plants and flowering Gorse. The track through the reserve led to another track which crossed a footbridge over the dual carriageway and the railway line, before emerging next to Earley station. The walk continued north-westwards along Wokingham Road before turning into Mays Lane Cemetery. An old grave had a sedum and some pixie-cup lichens. The cemetery was next to the eastern side of the Sol Joel playing fields where a Mistle Thrush was guarding a big clump of Mistletoe on a tall Lime tree. In the middle of the playing fields, a row of Black-headed Gulls in winter plumage were lined up along the top bar of a goal. Back at the car park, the chacking calls of Fieldfares betrayed their presence in the surrounding trees.

Rob Stallard led 9 members on a circular walk, starting from **the Cornwell Centre on the western boundary of Tilehurst**, on the morning of **Wednesday 21 February**. The original plan had been to look at the veteran trees of Savernake Forest, near Marlborough, but a forecast of heavy rain and gale force wind gusts had convinced Rob that it would be better to have a local walk instead. This was the third

year in a row that the Savernake walk had had to be cancelled due to unfavourable weather conditions. The heavy rain did not materialise, but it was very windy and conditions underfoot were exceedingly muddy, following earlier rain events. The walk started out through Cornwell Copse. What was usually a small stream flowed with greatly increased volume in a deep channel at the lower end of the wood. Soft Shield-fern and Hard-fern were growing on the stream banks. After crossing Sulham Hill, the walk continued through a small copse on the south-west side of the road. Bluebell leaves were showing well. Distinctive fallen leaves helped in the identification of several Wild Service-trees and there were a number of clumps of Butcher's-broom bearing both bright red berries and small white flowers on the upper side of what looked like leaves but were actually modified stems.

Leaving the copse, the path continued along a fence which separated a horse-grazed field from a very wet ploughed field. A big flock of Redwings plus a few Fieldfares and some Starlings flew up from the grassy pasture and into the trees on the edge of nearby Clay Copse. The route led across the bottom of the ploughed field, then continued southwards along a narrow path which dropped steeply down through the adjoining woods. Rob said that the woods appear to have been clear-felled around the time of World War II, then most had been planted with conifers, leaving just a strip of broad-leaved woodland at the bottom edge of the woods. Dog's Mercury plants beside the path were well grown but not yet in flower, a few Lesser Celandine plants were flowering and the leaves of Greater Stitchwort were identified. The route dropped down almost to the bottom of woods, then turned westwards along a narrow path through the strip of broad-leaved woodland. Clumps of Hairy Wood-rush were in flower on a bank above the path and a few Primrose flowers were seen. An even narrower path led out into the field below the woods.

The next track ran along the edge of the woodland. The underlying geology was now Chalk and the ground underfoot was no longer muddy. A number of Cherry Plum bushes and a single Blackthorn bush in the woodland edge were white with blossom. The Cherry Plum had reflexed sepals, larger flowers and no thorns, while the Blackthorn had clumps of smaller flowers and thorns. The woodland edge turned north-westwards and Rob commented that the sheltered field margin here is good for chalk grassland flowers in summer. The path led back into the bottom of the woods, where the trees were now mostly Beeches. A tree at the side of the path had a patch of foam near its base, thought to be caused by a chemical reaction between rising sap and rainwater running down the trunk. In the strip of woodland between the path and the field below were a single bush of Box, a big old Yew and many clumps of Butcher's-broom, which had probably been planted. There was a dense ground cover of Lesser Periwinkle. The path crossed a temporary stream which was flowing down from the woods above, thanks to the excessive rainfall of recent weeks. A deep trackway led towards the road. Rob reported that a Bird's-nest Orchid had been found on its bank in early summer one year.

After re-crossing Sulham Hill, the walk continued along the bottom strip of woodland. Leaves of Sanicle were identified and another Beech tree with foam at its base was found. A bird pellet containing small bones, thought to have been dropped by an owl, was spotted down on the ground. The route then followed a path up through the conifer woods, where a Goldcrest was singing high in the trees, and out onto the ploughed fields. Skylarks were rising up from the ground, singing in flight and then dropping back down again. A flock of Goldfinches were calling from the hedge line. Field Pansy was found in flower and the leaves of Burdock and Parsley-piert were seen. These fields are part of the Sulham Woodmeadows project, which aims to return three large fields to nature. They have been sown with a mixture of grasses and wild flowers and will be grazed by cattle. Over 2 km of hedges have been planted, with ditches being dug next to some of the hedge lines. After crossing Long Lane, the next path crossed Barefoots Copse, where the feathery leaves of Pignut were seen and Moschatel was found next to the path. The final section of the walk crossed Cornwell Copse and led back to the cars. Most of the group then went to the Greyhound at Tidmarsh for lunch.

Jan Haseler led 13 members on a walk through **Pamber Forest**, starting from the Impstone Road car park, on the dull grey morning of **Wednesday 13 March**. Following weeks of rain, the Forest was sodden, with deep mud in places. The walk started out southwards through Lord's Wood. This area of woodland, together with the heathland to the south, forms part of the territory of the small herd of Dexter cattle which live all year round on Silchester Common. Sightings here included clumps of Hard Fern, a flower-head of Hairy Wood-rush, the fungus Hairy Curtain-crust *Stereum hirsutum* and a piece of wood stained green by the Green Elf-cup fungus *Chlorociboria aeruginascens*. The route led downwards to Silchester Brook, which was crossed by a flat wooden bridge, with an extensive area of deep mud beyond. A gateway then led through the stock fencing which marks the limits of the cattle territory and into Pamber Forest, which is owned by the Englefield Estate, but managed as a nature reserve by the HIOWWT. The track led through an area of Sweet Chestnut coppice. It was pointed out that there are no Bluebells in the Forest. Documents from the Englefield Estate archives show that in the last few years of the coppice cycle, gates were left open to allow cattle in to graze, but Bluebells will not tolerate trampling or grazing.

The track climbed gently upwards, leading to a sandy area planted with Scots Pine. On the woodland floor was a carpet of Bilberry, with pink flowers visible on a few of the plants. The track led to the main north/south ride which extends along the entire length of the Forest and which has a firm mud-free gravel surface. Heading southwards, a Chiffchaff sang, one of at least three birds which were heard during the course of the walk. The ride was edged with a dense border of Alder Buckthorn, caterpillar food-plant of the Brimstone butterfly. The walk continued southwards, crossing one major ride junction, then turned right at the next junction. This ride had wide, cleared margins and ran past areas which had been recently coppiced. Wood Spurge was coming up densely in a plot which had been cut perhaps two winters ago. The ride led gently downhill to the Honeymill Brook. Flood water had ponded up on the upstream side of the track, but the culvert underneath it had kept the water level below the height of the track. Lesser Celandine flowers brightened up the stream-side vegetation. Another coppice plot had Willows which had been pollarded. Apparently their regrowth is particularly favoured by browsing Roe and Muntjac Deer. As further protection against the deer, all the coppice plots are protected by high stock fencing. Just before the track reached the western boundary of the Forest, a public footpath turned back sharply south-eastwards. It crossed a particularly muddy stretch close to the start which was negotiated with some difficulty. Sightings along the footpath included Barren Strawberry in flower, a new leaf spike of Common Figwort and a Scaly Male-fern.

After several more turns, the group reached the part of the Forest where wild Daffodils are found. The grey-green leaves could be seen under the tree canopy over a surprising distance and there was a somewhat sparse display of flowers. Closer inspection showed that there were not many buds still waiting to flower. A later conversation with the reserve manager revealed that there had been a particularly good display of Daffodils last year and he was not surprised that this year's display was somewhat reduced. After inspecting the Daffodils, the group turned round and retraced their footsteps back to the main north-south ride, then turned eastwards along a ride with wide cleared margins, but where a few trees had been left untouched. Fallen leaves below one of these trees came from a Wild Service-tree. The ride climbed gently uphill and led into the area where the cattle live, crossing the stock fencing at a point where there is a cattle grid with a gate at the side. Two members of the Wildlife Trust staff, including the reserve manager, were using chain-saws to cut down trees at the edge of the track. The route then led northwards across heathland, where a Slow-worm was found resting on the path. It was encouraged to move into the vegetation at the side of the path. The mud at the crossing of the Silchester Brook had to be tackled again. Siskins called from the Alders high overhead. The final part of the walk was back up through Lord's Wood to the car park. Most of the group then went to the Calleva Arms in Silchester for lunch.

Fiona Brown led 15 members on a circular walk round **The Coombes**, an area of woodland **between Arborfield, Barkham and Bearwood,** on the morning of **Wednesday 17 April**. Starting point was the Bull at Barkham. There was a cold northerly wind, but apart from a brief hail shower at the beginning, the weather was mostly bright. Before the walk started, Fiona gave a brief introduction to the history and geology of the area. The Bull has been a pub since at least 1728. There used to be a smithy here as well and the remains of the forge can be seen in the pub restaurant. The woodland at the Coombes was originally part of Windsor Forest. Last year, Arborfield and Newland and Barkham Parish Councils got together to buy the woodland and ensure that it continues as a public amenity. The bottom of the woodland is on London Clay, overlain higher up by the sands of the Bagshot beds. They date from about 50 to 44 million years ago. At the top of the site are river terrace gravels, deposited about 250,000 years ago.

After leaving the car park of the Bull, the route led left along the busy Barkham Road for a short distance before turning right along a track which led up to the woodland. A herd of nine Fallow Deer was grazing in a field on the other side of the road. The bottom of the woods is on London Clay and was blue with Bluebells, perhaps not quite at their peak yet. Also in flower were Greater Stitchwort, Wood Speedwell, Wood Anemone, Wood Sorrel, Common Dog-violet, Yellow Pimpernel and Bugle. Round lumps on the underside of Wood Speedwell leaves were identified as galls caused by the rust *Puccinia veronicae*. A number of streams and boggy patches were to be found on the Clay and the leaves of Brooklime, Water Mint and Gypsywort were seen in wetter places. The woodland was alive with bird song and miscellaneous bird calls. Species heard included Blackbird, Robin, Chaffinch, Dunnock, Song Thrush, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Wren, Chiffchaff, Jay, Stock Dove, Raven and Nuthatch. The group turned left onto a footpath through the woods and then left again along another path which bordered a field where two Roe Deer were feeding. One of the deer had short velvet-covered antlers. Primroses, a single clump of flowering Ramsons and unfurling Hart's-tongue Fern were seen in the woodland on the other side of the path.

Emerging from the woodland, a sharp right turn led to a track which ran in a north-westerly direction. In the field on the left of the track, a large white long-horned bull was lying down. The insides of its ears and its muzzle were black and its horns were white, tipped with black. It was thought to be a White Park bull. A Buzzard flapped slowly out of a tree beside the track and flew across the field where the grazing Roe Deer had been seen earlier. From this different viewpoint, three more Roe Deer could be seen lying down. Sanicle and Three-nerved Sandwort were in flower, a Green Woodpecker called and a Great Spotted Woodpecker was glimpsed in the trees ahead. As the track climbed up the slope, it came to a section where there were many animal holes in the banks on either side. This was an indication that the underlying geology had changed from Clay to Bagshot Sands. The track led to a T-junction where the group turned right, passing the farm shop at Ellis's Hill Farm. At the top of the hill, the next track led off to the left, passing a pond where a Grey Wagtail and a Mallard were seen. A footpath turned sharply back to the right, heading towards Bearwood Lakes golf course. Honesty plants were in flower beside the path, and an Orange-tip butterfly with its wings closed rested on one of the flower heads. Nearby, the distinctive hoverfly *Helophilus pendulus* was seen. It is nicknamed 'the Footballer', due to the distinctive stripes on its thorax. A small Turkey Oak next to the path had male and female flowers at eye height.

The footpath led to an open area with leggy Heather and bare sandy patches. Common Stork's-bill, Sheep's Sorrel, Wall Speedwell, Dove's-foot Crane's-bill and Field Wood-rush were found on the open sandy area. There were lumps of Greensand lying around, deposited there when the Loddon Gravels were laid down, since some of the Blackwater's tributaries come from the Sussex Weald. The next track led eastwards, parallel to the edge of the golf course. The woods on the right of the track were dominated by Rhododendron. At the eastern edge of the woodland, another track led southwards, back towards Barkham. The slime mould Wolf's Milk *Lycogala terrestre* was found on a rotting fallen

tree. It was stained pink where slugs or snails had been nibbling it. Earlier in the walk, the slime mould *Lycogala epidendrum,* which bled orange where it had been damaged, had also been seen. Towards the end of the walk, Fiona offered members the option of heading straight for the pub or turning right along a short but muddy footpath which led past Barkham Manor. Everyone chose the latter option – which turned out to be exceedingly muddy, but gave good views of the house and garden. The sprawling branch of an enormous old London Plane tree was propped up by a concrete support. Cuckooflower and Hop were also seen here. Most of the group then stayed for lunch at The Bull.

Fiona Cummins led 15 members on a walk to Flowercroft Wood and back, starting from the Herb Farm at **Sonning Common** on **Wednesday 8 May**. It was a warm, sunny morning, particularly welcome after a long cold and wet spring. The walk started out by turning left along busy Peppard Road, then turned right along the much quieter Blackmore Lane. The lane was bordered on each side by steep banks which were blue with Bluebells, with Greater Stitchwort and Goldilocks Buttercup growing amongst them. The scratchy song of a Whitethroat was heard and male Orange-tip butterflies patrolled along the lane. Turning left, the next footpath crossed Blounts Court Road, with Cut-leaved Crane's-bill in the field margin near the road. It then crossed a field with a well-fertilised grass crop. In the background was silence – no bird calls, no sign of wildlife. The path continued along the edge of Crosscroft Wood. Down in the field margin, sightings included Field Pansy and one of the Cornsalads. Birdsong was heard again, from Blackbird, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Wren, Song Thrush and a distant Green Woodpecker.

Crossing into the edge of Crosscroft Wood, the grasses Wood Melick and Wood Millet were identified, together with flowers of Wood Anemone and Bugle, and a small click beetle was spotted on a leaf. There followed a steep climb up through woodland, with the harsh call of a Raven in the background. The path led to Kent's Hill, a large open clearing of fine Chalk Grassland within the wood. Salad Burnet was abundant, and both its red female flowers and yellow male flowers were observed. Wayfaring-trees were in flower and Dwarf and Carline Thistle were present. Other plants included Glaucous Sedge, Field Scabious, Hairy Violet, Wild Strawberry, Hedge Bedstraw, Marjoram and Wood Spurge. A single Grizzled Skipper butterfly was seen, together with several Dingy Skippers, a Common Blue and two Green Hairstreaks. A narrow path at the bottom of the clearing led down to another small open area within the woodland. The leaves of several Twayblades were found here. The flower spike on the largest plant had been damaged. Most of the plants were protected with wire mesh covers. Pushing back the vegetation revealed more plants, and in the end 15 were found. Nearby, a Red-headed Cardinal Beetle was seen on Dog's Mercury. Continuing down the hill, the path led past a large Spurge-laurel bush and shiny leaves of Black Bryony were seen scrambling through the vegetation.

The walk continued along the track which runs along the valley bottom of Flowercroft Wood. The recent cold spell had prolonged the flowering period of the Bluebells and the woodland floor was a sea of blue. Dotted amongst the Bluebells were a few flower spikes of Yellow Archangel and flowers of Three-nerved Sandwort were also found here. Pale green seed discs on the path alerted the group to the presence of a few Wych Elm trees. A Peacock butterfly basked on a bramble leaf. Purple-pore Bracket and Wolf's Milk slime mould were found on a fallen conifer log. The track emerged from Flowercroft Wood and ran along the edge of several arable fields. Stone Parsley, Common Vetch, Wall Speedwell and Bladder Campion were amongst the sightings in the field margin. Butterflies seen included Red Admiral and Green-veined White and a Skylark was heard. One of the group had not wanted to scramble up the rough and steep paths of Kent's Hill. She was rewarded by the sighting of a Stoat running along the field margin. The track led to Blounts Farm, where a Ruby Tiger moth was spotted on the side of a deep ditch. After a short stretch along a footpath next to Blounts Court Road, the walk rejoined the route from earlier in the morning. Some of the group then had lunch in the café at the Herb Farm.

Jim Wills led a walk to BBOWT's **Homefield Wood** reserve on the morning of **Wednesday 5 June**. The sun was shining brightly but there was a cold wind. 15 members gathered on Marlow Common, at the point where the road through Pullingshill Wood is crossed by the Chiltern Way. The walk started off westwards, following the Chiltern Way as it dropped steeply downhill through the woods, then continued along a footpath with tall scrub on one side and fenced off flowery grassland on the other. A Red-headed Cardinal Beetle was spotted at the side of the path. Other invertebrates seen during this section of the walk included a Scorpion Fly, nymphs of Dark Bush-cricket, a Hairy Shieldbug, a Bryony Ladybird and two boldly-marked caterpillars of the Mullein Moth, one on Great Mullein and the other on Common Figwort. Tall yellow Goat's-beard flowers were dotted across the grassland. Rough Chervil was growing by the path. Flower-heads which were still in bud drooped downwards and the stems were a distinctive purple colour. Other flowers beside the path included Long-stalked Crane's-bill, Hop Trefoil, Greater Knapweed, Changing Forget-me-not and Red, White and Bladder Campion. White Bryony scrambled through the hedge. It is dioecious, with male and female flowers on different plants. A plant was examined closely – all its flowers were female. A Bryony Ladybird was found on White Bryony. Further along the track, the shiny spade-shaped leaves of Black Bryony were scrambling through the hedge. Out in the grassland, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil and Pyramidal Orchid were just coming into flower and a Small Heath butterfly was seen in flight. A Blackcap sang from deep in the hedge.

At the end of the footpath, the route turned right along a short stretch of road before turning left into Homefield Wood. The Chiltern Way continues westwards along the main track which follows the valley bottom. The nature reserve is on the north side of the valley and is partly scrubby grassland and partly shady woodland. Turning right towards the first field of the reserve, tall spikes of Common Spotted-orchids were seen. After entering the reserve at a kissing gate, members spent a little while exploring the first scrubby field. The orchid tally quickly rose, with sightings of Military Orchid, Common Twayblade, Bee Orchid, Fly Orchid and Greater Butterfly-orchid. A Grizzled Skipper butterfly was nectaring on a Common Spotted-orchid and a Meadow Brown was flying in the sunshine. The next part of the walk was along a track through shady woodland. A Broad-leaved Helleborine at the side of the track was not yet flowering, but showed the characteristic spiral arrangement of leaves up the stem. On the other side of the track, a Bird's-nest Orchid was somewhat the worse for wear – it looked as if it had been trodden on. After walking westwards along the valley side for a little way, the group came to some big clearings where there was a spectacular display of orchids, especially the tall spikes of Military Orchid and the easy-to-miss Fly Orchids. These were protected by a series of fences to keep them safe from browsing animals. A White Helleborine, not yet in flower, was also found here.

The next part of the walk followed a footpath northwards up through Homefield Wood and out into the fields beyond. Flowering Wood Speedwell was noted beside the path through the wood and an old Field Maple was seen. The first few fields had margins which had been planted to give seeds for game birds. Plants identified included yellow-flowered Common Melilot, Chicory, Cornflower, Hemlock and Stone Parsley. Another White Bryony plant was inspected and this time, all the flowers were male. A well-filled pond in the corner of the next field marked the highest point of the walk, where the underlying geology was Clay-with-flints. There followed a short stretch of road before turning left down the next footpath. It ran across a field which appeared to have been planted with a wild flower mix, including Sainfoin, Common Knapweed, Dwarf Spurge, Rough Hawkbit and Teasel. Swine-cress was growing in the path – it needs to be on fertile soils where the seeds can be pressed into the ground by humans or heavy grazing animals. The footpath led steeply downhill, next to a fence which had the purple form of Stinking Iris in flower at its base. After crossing the bottom of the valley, it climbed steeply up the far side through an area of Chalk grassland where Yellow-wort, Quaking Grass and Hoary Ragwort were amongst the sightings. At the top of the field, the path led into woodland, where Sanicle and Woodruff were in flower. The walk continued through the woodland of the northern section of Marlow Common. Where the track crossed a road through the Common, Nipplewort, Common

Valerian and Wall Lettuce were noted. The route then led back across Marlow Common to the starting point. Most of the walkers then had lunch at the Cricketers at Littlewick Green.

Cathy Harris led a circular walk on the **Hardwick Estate** on the cool grey morning of **Wednesday 3 July.** Members gathered by the roadside near the former Kings Head pub (now a private house) at Collins End, near Goring Heath. A gap in the hedge marked the start of a footpath which led in a south-westerly direction. Cathy gave a brief description of the history of the estate, dating back to Saxon times. It was bought by Sir Charles Day Rose in 1909. He had made his fortune through mining and railway investments in North America, India and Africa. He was a keen sportsman, motorist and aviator, and was believed to be one of the inspirations for Toad of Toad Hall in The Wind in the Willows. His family still owns the 900 acre estate, which consists of 500 acres of sustainably managed woodland, together with a number of organic farms. The farmland was converted to organic status in 1975.

The footpath led through a number of grassy pastures. It was pointed out that one of these to the right of the path was known for its thriving population of the tiny-flowered Blinks, which flowers in the spring. Two Pyramidal Orchids were spotted next to the path. The next field was an old orchard, surrounded by a neatly laid hedge. At the entrance to the field was a medlar tree with fruits. A line of big old Walnut and Cherry trees crossed the field, with bees seen flying in and out of a hole in one of the Cherry trees. At the far side of the field, a Kestrel was spotted and a Green Woodpecker was seen on a telegraph pole. There was a brief diversion to look at the stunning display of flowers in a field cultivated by Artisan Flowers, a small company which grows flowers organically and sustainably for the domestic market. The walk continued along a track to a field of broad beans with a beautiful display of poppies round the margins. A narrow pathway led through the crop, with abundant specimens amongst the crop of Corn Spurrey, a rare arable weed. Towards the middle of the field, a single pink-flowered specimen of the even rarer Weasel's-snout was found.

The next field crossed a flowery pasture, which was being lightly grazed by two horses on the far side. Flowers seen here included Vervain, Musk Mallow, Self-heal and White Campion. Several Meadow Brown butterflies were on the wing. In the next field, the path crossed a steep chalk bank with a rich mix of flowers, including both Field Scabious and Small Scabious with narrow leaves, Pyramidal Orchids, Rest Harrow, Greater Knapweed, Yellow-wort, Marjoram, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil and Hop Trefoil. Marbled White butterflies were flying here. At the bottom of the valley were a number of big clumps of Musk Thistle. The path climbed steeply up the other side of the valley, dipped into a strip of woodland and emerged on the track to Path Hill Farm. Signs were displayed in the farmyard for a number of businesses, including Oxford Renewables, Path Hill Outdoors, which delivers outdoor education programmes to schools, youth groups and individuals, and Hempen, which produces organically grown hemp products. The track continued on the other side of the farmyard, leading into woodland. A Song Thrush and Enchanter's Nightshade were seen here. At the side of the track was a bank with many round holes. While the discussion as to what had made the holes was under way, a Common Frog was spotted on the bank. It hopped quickly up to the top of the bank and over to the other side. Then several Ringlet butterflies, Woodruff and a Common Gromwell plant were seen. The track led to a road which was lined with Cherry trees. A sign asked passers-by not to pick the cherries as they were going to be sold as a commercial crop. After some debate, it was decided that cherries which were already on the ground could not be sold and so could instead be picked up and eaten. They were delicious. The track led back to the footpath where Pyramidal Orchids had been seen earlier in the day, and this led back to the cars. Everyone then went to the Packhorse pub for lunch.

Fiona Brown led 18 members on a walk round **Charvil Country Park** and BBOWT's **Loddon Reserve** on the morning of **Wednesday 21 August**, starting from the Heron on the Ford pub. The weather was mostly sunny but with a cool breeze. The route led left out of the pub car park and along the lane for a short distance, then turned right through a gap in the hedge and into the country park. It is an area

of former gravel pits and remnant pastureland in the flood plain of the lower River Loddon. The path led through an area of mixed scrub and woodland, passing a young family who were picking fruit from the abundant blackberry crop. Butterflies seen in this part of the walk included several Speckled Woods, a Comma and a Red Admiral. Common Centaury and Red Bartsia were in flower at the side of the path. The walk then continued alongside a lake where a Migrant Hawker patrolled over the waterside bushes. Other dragonfly species seen during the walk included Beautiful and Banded Demoiselle and Common Blue Damselfly. Tall bankside flowers included abundant Water Mint, Gypsywort, Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil, Purple Loosestrife and Common Fleabane. A Jersey Tiger moth was seen up in a Buddleia bush.

The route then led under a railway bridge and emerged at a large grassy field which was dotted yellow with the flowers of Lesser Hawkbit. Continuing through woodland, a clump of about 10 Broad-leaved Helleborines was flourishing down by the path. Two more groups of Broad-leaved Helleborine were found later in the walk. A small Frog was seen nearby. To the right of the path was a lake, with viewing platforms giving good views across the water. In front of an island were a female Mandarin, a few Tufted Ducks and some other eclipse-plumage water fowl, probably mostly Mallards. Yellow Loosestrife was in flower to one side of the viewing platform. Other waterside plants included Wild Angelica and abundant Hemlock Water-dropwort. Hop has separate male and female plants. A male plant, with unobtrusive small greenish-white flowers, was inspected. Feeding on it was the spiky caterpillar of a Comma butterfly. Down on the path, one of the group found a dead Grass Snake. The next section of path ran next to a river channel where Loddon Pondweed could be seen. It had floating elliptic pointed leaves. The river channel was too deep and vertically sided to permit close inspection of the plants. The path led to a main road which had to be crossed to reach the pavement on the far side, then recrossed to follow the pavement on the bridge which crossed the River Loddon.

The footpath led through a pub car park and over a wooden bridge, where tall leafless spikes of dark green Common Club-rush filled the channel below. There was a Loddon Nature Reserve sign here. Turning left and following a board walk, flowers of Water Chickweed, Trifid Burr-marigold and Water Forget-me-not were seen, while female Hops with green cone-like fruits scrambled through the vegetation. Further on, Creeping-Jenny and Marsh Woundwort were seen. Signs warned of the dangers to people and pets of toxic blue-green algae in the water. Fiona had spotted a large Shaggy Bracket fungus high up in an Ash tree. The route then led under the railway, through some horse paddocks and back to the pub car park, passing a Kestrel perched on a dead branch near the top of a hedgerow tree. Most of the group then stayed for lunch at the Heron on the Ford.

On **Wednesday 18 September**, Rob Stallard led a 3.5 mile walk from **Moulsford to Cleeve Lock** and back, following the Thames Path along the west bank of the Thames. The morning started dull under dense cloud cover, but the sun soon burned through the clouds. 12 members gathered in the car park next to the village sports fields. Two of them reported that, during the drive to Moulsford, in the area of roadworks by Junction 12 of the westbound M4, they had seen the corpse of an Otter. The walk started out along a footpath which crossed the Recreation Ground, where small patches of flowery grassland had been left unmown. Flowers seen here included Field Scabious, Lady's Bedstraw and Vervain. The route led through the village, crossed the main Streatley to Wallingford road and followed Ferry Lane to the river bank by the Beetle and Wedge inn. There was a brief diversion at the junction of Ferry Lane and the main road to inspect the Hedgerow Crane's-bill which had both pink and white flowers. Rob pointed out Pellitory-of-the-wall growing on the left side of Ferry Lane. On the right side of the lane, Ivy flowers had attracted Honey Bees and Ivy Bees.

The Thames Path crosses the outdoor dining area of the Beetle and Wedge, then turns right, following the west bank of the Thames. The path led past the gardens of some very expensive looking houses, then passed through a wooded stretch. A pond to the right of the towpath had Comfrey, Wild Angelica,

Meadowsweet, Gypsywort and a froglet. Also seen nearby were Water Chickweed and Water Figwort with winged stems and rounded leaves. For the rest of the walk, the Thames Path ran through open fields. It was a busy stretch of river, with many racing boats with varying numbers of oars and oarsmen. At the first open stretch of river bank, there was an animal spraint with red claws and bits of red shell. As the walk progressed, it seemed that at every accessible stretch of bank, there were more American Signal Crayfish remains. Warden Pete Morton of Withymead Reserve, which lies across the river from the location of the walk, was consulted afterwards as to whether it was likely to be Otter or Mink which had been eating Crayfish. Pete suggested that Otter was more likely, because they will eat on the go, or find a suitable stretch of bank. Mink, on the other hand, tend to have numerous burrows and when they are hunting they will catch food and return to the most local one to eat. This behaviour is to avoid predation and to avoid having food stolen by other predators or other Mink.

A wide variety of plants were growing at the water's edge. These included Common Fleabane, a clump of Sneezewort and a giant-leaved Water Dock. Branched Bur-reed was growing next to a mooring platform. A small metallic green beetle was found on Water Mint, a Brown Hawker dragonfly patrolled round the bankside vegetation and a small mixed flock of Swallows and House Martins was on the wing. Amphibious Bistort was flowering, with the plant floating on the surface of the water. A Hornet was seen, there were a number of plants of Orange Balsam and a rose bush had numerous Robin's Pincushion galls, as well as red hips. The walk continued to Cleeve Lock, then members retraced their footsteps back to the Beetle and Wedge, where most stayed for lunch.

On **16 October**, Jan Haseler led a walk starting from the King William IV pub at **Hailey, near Wallingford**. Members were pleased to see the 'Walkers welcome' sign at the entrance to the top car park. It was a mild day with grey skies and some drizzle initially, but the skies became brighter as the morning progressed. Two Buzzards drifted above the car park and a few Fieldfares were heard. Setting off, 10 members turned right out of the car park, then after a short distance, turned right again and headed north along a track which was signed as the Chiltern Way. The track was closed to wheeled vehicles because electricity board workers were clearing trees from below the power lines, but walkers could still get through. The track led to a farm, then a footpath continued northwards, passing Glynne's Wood, which had been planted in 2004 and where waxy red Guelder-rose berries stood out on a grey morning. The path dipped down across a ploughed field, then climbed up to lead into Wicks Wood. At the entrance to the wood was a memorial to six young men in their twenties who lost their lives when their plane crashed here during World War II. It is a beech wood, and the group were tempted off the path by snowy white Ivory Woodwax *Hygrophorus eburneus* fungi and specimens of White Saddle *Helvella crispa*. Then some marvellously camouflaged Hare's Ear *Otidea onotica* fungi were spotted nearby. It proved to be a particularly good site for fungi, and other sightings included Deceiver *Laccaria laccata*, Amethyst Deceiver *L. amethystina*, Aromatic Knight *Tricholoma lascivum,* Beech Milkcap *Lactarius blennius,* Whitelaced Shank *Megacollybia platyphylla*, Saffron-drop Bonnet *Mycena crocata,* False Death Cap *Amanita citrina,* Sunny Brittlegill *Russula solaris* and several unidentified Coral fungi. The Sunny Brittllegill, which has a white and yellow cap, is one of the most attractive species in that genus. It associates with Beech and is seldom recorded. A dark brown Bolete with a red stem and yellow flesh was thought to be Matt Bolete *Xerocomellus pruinatus.* At this point, two members left the group and retraced their footsteps back to the start, spotting a Hare at the edge of a field on their way back.

The rest of the group continued along the footpath to Woodhouse Farm, then turned right along a footpath which climbed along the edge of a ploughed field and up towards Mongewell Woods. In the farmyard, the trunks of a number of fallen trees had been stacked in a big open barn. Emerging from the heart wood were a number of tufts of Golden Scalycap *Pholiota aurivella.* As the group followed the footpath eastwards up through the fields, they were overtaken by a number of vehicles which were transporting people, dogs, guns and dead pheasants up the hill. It turned out that a shoot was taking

place, but the organisers were adamant that nobody on the public footpath would be in any danger of being shot. The field margin had been sown with a bird feeding mixture. Arable weeds found here included Sharp-leaved Fluellen, Field Madder, Fool's Parsley, Wild Mignonette, Field Pansy and Burnet Saxifrage. Two Skylarks were seen.

At the point where the footpath led into Mongewell Woods, and after the shoot organisers had confirmed it was safe to do so, the group followed a Permissive Bridleway southwards along the eastern edge of the field. In the wood edge were many berry-bearing bushes and trees, including Buckthorn, Whitebeam and Wayfaring-tree, while flowers included Musk Mallow, Goat's Beard, Greater Knapweed and Field Scabious. Two Broad-leaved Helleborine plants were spotted by a sharp-eyed botanist at the back of the group. (Everyone else had walked past them without noticing them.) The Permissive Bridleway led to the track which climbed uphill from the King William IV. The route started down this track, but after a short distance, the Permissive Bridleway passed through a gap in the hedge and followed the field edge downhill. Up against the shelter of the hedge, a Common Rock-rose plant had two flowers and a Pale Toadflax plant still had flowers. On the other side of the track, a row of Cortinarius fungi were growing by the fence. Finally, a Kestrel was spotted in the pub car park. Thanks to the tree-clearing work by the electricity board, the electricity supply to the pub had been turned off for the day, so the kitchen could not open. The pub staff had kindly transferred the booking to the Perch and Pike at South Stoke.

Rob Stallard led 12 members on a circular walk round **Pangbourne**, starting from the George Hotel, on **Wednesday 20 November**. It was a cold morning, with blue sky and sunshine, following the first hard frost of the autumn. Before starting out, Rob gave the group a brief introduction to the history of Pangbourne. The George Hotel was first established as a coaching inn in the early 1600s. There used to be a ferry across the Thames at the end of the adjacent road. Until the coming of the railway, the centre of habitation was across the river at Whitchurch on Thames, while Pangbourne consisted of isolated houses on drier patches of land amongst the surrounding marshland. The group then set off, turning right out of the hotel car park, crossing the busy A329, and walking back along the other side of the road. Pausing at the bridge over the River Pang, Rob pointed out the site of the former water mill which is shown on 19th century maps and is likely also to be on the site of a mill mentioned in the Domesday Book. Turning right, the walk continued along The Moors, where flowers of Purple Toadflax and Wood Avens were seen, and other sightings included Petty Spurge, a Polypody fern and Jelly Ear on a log. A mix of footpaths and quiet residential streets led to the Pangbourne allotments and beyond to the meadows. These lie on a mixture of gravel terraces and lower-lying wetter channels. The route led to a gravel area where there were a number of big clumps of Dwarf Gorse in flower. There followed a brief and fruitless search for Petty Whin. Many years ago, it was reported from near here, but has not been seen since.

The walk continued across the meadows and back to the River Pang. Flowers of Water Forget-me-not could be seen at the water's edge. This stretch of the river was formally classified as being in 'Good' condition, but it has recently been down-graded to 'Poor' and the mats of Water-crowfoot have disappeared. After crossing the bridge over the Pang, the next footpath followed the river bank southwards towards Tidmarsh. There were several specimens of Wrinkled Peach on a small fallen branch. This fungus favours Elm and there were many Elms on either side of the path. Most were small, but there were a few surprisingly large specimens which appeared to be resisting Dutch Elm Disease. Spindle bushes next to the path were covered in pink berries, a Herb-Robert plant and Black Horehound were in flower and Nail galls were found on the leaves of a Lime. The path led to a grassy meadow which was wet under foot. During the pre-walk on the previous Friday, the river had remained within its banks. But now it had over-flowed and a fast current was pouring into the adjacent field. Crossing it involved wading through the shallower margin, then jumping over the fast-flowing channel.

Continuing southwards, the path was narrow, muddy and slippery in places. Specimens of Cushion Bracket were found on a fallen branch of what appeared to be a *Prunus* species.

The path led to Tidmarsh, emerging on the east side of the busy A340 which runs through the village. The group turned left and headed to the Greyhound Inn, which has a thatched roof with an ornamental greyhound on the roof. Rob pointed out that the pub building was a fine example of 12th century cruck construction. This little thatched cottage became a wayside public house in 1625. After crossing the busy A340, the walk continued a short distance along Tidmarsh Lane, before following a footpath which led off to the right. A heap of dung next to the path was home to a cup fungus of genus *Peziza* and many inkcaps *Coprinopsis.* In contrast to the damp and muddy river valley, the ground underfoot was dry, as the footpath climbed up over the Chalk which lines the sides of the Pang valley. A hedge which bordered the path contained many Wayfaring-tree bushes. Further on, clumps of Butcher's-broom were spotted at the side of the path. They sported both bright red berries and greenish-white flowers.

The footpath emerged on Bere Court Road, which is bordered by large and expensive properties. In medieval times, Bere Court was the home of the Abbot of Reading. Along the lane, Green Alkanet was in flower. Turning right, the route led to Pangbourne Hill. Nearby, Round-spored Oysterling *Crepidotus cesatii* was spotted on a twig. Near the bottom of the hill, Rob paused to tell the group a little about the local history. The church of St James the Less was originally built some time before 1175, but has been rebuilt twice. Next to the church is Church Cottage where Kenneth Grahame, author of 'The Wind in the Willows', lived for the last 8 years of his life, from 1924. He wrote the book before this, while he was living at Cookham Deane, but it is thought that the illustrator, E.H.Shepherd, took his inspiration for many of his pictures from the Rivers Thames and Pang here. Looking from the road, the old village lock-up, a round red brick building with a conical roof, can be seen in the garden of Church Cottage. The walkers then returned to the George Hotel for lunch.

Julia Cooper and Ian Duddle led 11 members on a walk up to the **Ridgeway**, starting from **Churn, near Blewbury**, on the cold and overcast morning of **Wednesday 11 December**. While members were gathering at the start, some walked up to the bridge over the disused railway line between Didcot, Newbury and Southampton. A Yellowhammer was calling from the top of a Hawthorn at the side of the railway line and lower down in the bush, there were several House Sparrows, a Blue Tit and a Chaffinch. Next to the railway line on the other side of the bridge was a heap of farmyard manure. In front of the heap was a noxious-looking brown puddle which had attracted a Grey Wagtail and a Pied Wagtail. The group set off along a metalled track in a south-easterly direction. Three perching Buzzards were noted. Despite it being the middle of December, a number of plants were still in flower, including as usual, White Dead-nettle. Plants identified round the base of a barn adjacent to the track included flowering Common Field-speedwell, Scentless Mayweed, Pineapple-weed, Black Medick, Bristly Oxtongue, Weld and Dove's-foot Crane's-bill. A Kestrel accompanied the group, flying ahead and perching on the next-but-one telegraph pole. It gradually became bolder and remained until the walkers were almost underneath it. A string of race horses came gently down the gallops on the left hand side of the track, then turned round and set off back up the hill at a faster pace.

At this point the route joined the Ridgeway. Plants on the banks on either side included Lady's Bedstraw, Salad Burnet, Common Knapweed, Agrimony and Clustered Bellflower. There were several ant hills on the right hand bank, with a few covered by grass which looked denser and a brighter green than the surrounding vegetation. Common Rock-rose was growing on some of the ant hills. The edge of the field on the other side of the track had been left fallow and two Stonechats were foraging here. Back on the bank, Small Scabious plants with pinnatifid leaves and small seed-heads were identified. The track led to a small wooded area where five ways met. The woodland had an unusual mix of trees, including multi-stemmed Beech, Scots Pine and some neglected old coppiced Hazel stools.

The track led northwards out onto open downland where a large flock of Fieldfares were foraging down on the ground in the adjoining fields. Wild Parsnip and Burnet-saxifrage were in flower along the path. At the next track junction the walkers turned westwards. Once again, the banks on either side of the track had some interesting plants, including a Clustered Bellflower which was still flowering. The route rejoined the Ridgeway. Instead of walking straight back to the parked cars, there was a diversion to a second bridge over the disused railway. The hedges were bright with Spindle berries, many of which had split open to reveal their orange seeds (known as arils). Wall-rue was growing on the old brickwork of the bridge. Down in one of the adjacent fields was a mixed flock of Starlings and Fieldfares. The group then walked back to the cars, before driving back to the Blueberry pub in Blewbury for lunch.

Highlights of the Birding Year at Moor Copse 2024

By **Ailsa Claybourn**

2024 was a year of flooding when heavy rainfall combined with very high groundwater levels to keep much of the reserve under water for many months, limiting access at times.

January

7th - Heavy flooding. Grey Heron perched in a tree on the edge of Park Wood. Male Sparrowhawk hunting over Arable Field, which perhaps explains why I saw only 1 Meadow Pipit, there having been several previously.

28th - Woods very lively with territorial behaviour: Blue, Coal, Great, Long-tailed and Marsh Tit; Song and Mistle Thrush; Goldcrest; Bullfinch; Green Woodpecker all calling/singing. First Great Spotted Woodpecker of 2024 drumming. 1 Little Egret in River Field South. Siskin x 87; Redwing x 76.

February

Floods worsened as the month progressed. Parliament of 24 Rooks in Hogmoor Copse. Woodland birds active. Pre-migration gatherings: 220 Siskins and 100+ Redwing on 20th.

3 Mandarin Ducks courting (2 males, 1 female); 3 Skylarks in Arable Field (1 male, 2 females).

March

6th - 50+ Redwing, 1 Skylark.

8th - 3 Little Egret.

26th - Spring arrived! 14 Chiffchaff and 3 Blackcap singing. Song and Mistle Thrush collecting nesting material. No Redwing, scattering of Siskin. Much song and activity across reserve.

April

Flooding continued.

6th – The last Siskins. 14 singing Chiffchaffs. Blackcap, Blackbird, Robin, Dunnock, Wren, Great Tit and Goldcrest all singing, plus 1 Skylark in Arable Field. 3 Mallard in the new pool in 5 Acre Meadow.

May

Water levels fell at the end of the month.

8th - Wren, Robin, Chiffchaff, Dunnock, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush and Great Spotted Woodpecker calling; lots of baby bird calls in woodland vegetation. 1 Common Whitethroat singing in hedge between Barton's and Corner Field.

24th - Great and Long-tailed Tit families foraging and a pair of Great Spotted Woodpecker calling, drumming and feeding young in a nest in Hogmoor Copse. Several Goldcrest calling, singing and visible; the mild winter was good for them and they are breeding in numbers. 3 Skylark (1 singing) in Arable Field.

June

No wellies necessary by the 13th! The reserve quieter as the moult began. Chiffchaffs calling. 2 Buzzards in Moor Copse, an adult and a juvenile. Blackcap, Wren and Blackbird still particularly vocal.

July

3rd - 5 House Martins and a Swift overhead. Common Whitethroat, Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Wren and Robin still singing. Families of Blue, Long-tailed and Marsh Tits seen feeding. 2 Skylarks seen in Arable Field. An adult Kestrel hunting over Corner Field on 5th; and a juvenile in Cottage Field on 21st.

August

Robins singing winter songs. Juvenile Moorhen on the River Pang. Blue Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Treecreeper, Wren, Robin, Magpie and Chiffchaff calling. Kingfisher flew from the river into River Field South.

September

Flooding returned: on the 9th I wore shoes, 18th boots, 24th wellies. Kingfisher by river near Vinula Ride. Mixed flocks of Blue, Great and Long-tailed Tits with Chiffchaffs. Wrens singing along riverbank. Kestrel hunting along hedge in Wigley Field. Jays, back and forth, collecting acorns. Good views of Green Woodpecker.

October

First Siskins and Redwings arrived:

28th - 145 Siskin, 13 Redwing. Last 2 Chiffchaff left. Mistle Thrush singing; family of 3 in Park Wood. Male Sparrowhawk hunting Goldfinches. 2 Meadow Pipit and a Skylark in Arable Field.

November

Birds busy feeding: Blue, Long-tailed and Marsh Tits, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Robin. Chaffinches arrived – they are mainly Winter visitors on the reserve. Counted several families of Long-tailed Tits, including one of 7.

25th - Serious flooding after Storm Bert; 7 Mallard on floods in River Field South. Heron by river.

30th - Siskin x 61 and Redwing x 49.

December

Lots of Wrens seen along riverbank now the vegetation has died and collapsed. 1 Starling in Park Wood – no gatherings this year. Jackdaw numbers increasing. 9 Pheasants in River Field South.

30th – A Raven overhead cronking and a Mistle Thrush singing; Siskin x 463, Redwing x 26. Very low Redwing numbers this year, possibly because of mild weather on the continent meaning they didn't have to risk flying over the North Sea to the UK for food. On the same survey in 2024 there were Siskin x 535 and Redwing x 112.

Vertebrates Report

By **John Lerpiniere**

A few bird records are included but these are well recorded elsewhere, by far the most of these are collated by **Berkshire Ornithological Club**, see their website.

Http://berksoc.org.uk/recording/annual-reports/

The majority of Herpetiles (Amphibians and Reptiles) and Mammals are secretive and not easily seen but a few are more obvious such as Common Frog or urban Foxes hence many records for some, especially Muntjac. Many sightings are of road kills and most of these are not recorded, but a few are included here. An abundance of one is assumed in each record unless indicated by the value given after the date and before the place name.

Records received in 2023 but not 2024 included two Herpetiles (Great Crested Newt, Adder) and five Mammals (Edible Dormouse, House Mouse, Harvest Mouse, Field Vole, Pygmy Shrew). Two species noted 2024 but not 2023 were Hazel Dormouse and Water Shrew.

Abbreviations used are **ad**(s) **juv**(s) = juvenile, **imm**(s) = immature, **m(s)** = male, **fem(s)** = female, **sp**(p) = species, **CP** = Country Park, **GP**(s) = gravel pit, **LNR** = Local Nature Reserve.

The nomenclature follows regularly updated listings on the national recording website **iRecord** run primarily by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. This is a very versatile one-stop shop for all your records if you wish to record your sightings. The records are then available for use by relevant authorities including Thames Valley Environment Centre (**TVERC**) who make good use of them.

With thanks to all those who have contributed to this report. The names of a few of the contributors are abbreviated and these include **A&JB** Anne & John Booth; **LB** Liz Butcher; **RG** Renee Grayer; **JH** Jan Haseler; **CH** Cathy Holwill; **KJ** Katie Jenks**; JL** John Lerpiniere; **RB** Rob Stallard; **TM** Tricia Marcouse; **JP** Jo Parsons; **CW** Christine Williams.

FISH

Carp – *Carpinus sp*

06/03/24 large head found probably eaten by Otter, Paices Wood CP (Seven Lakes Angling) SU5863 (JL)

AMPHIBIANS

Common Toad – *Bufo bufo*

20/02/24 masses of adults and spawn Bradfield, Rushall Farm pond SU58417238 (JP)

30/04/24 Earley, in large plant pot in garden SU735710 (RG)

18/05/24 Aldermaston GP sheltering with a Glow-worm larva in an old owl box SU597668 (RDNHS trip leader Graham Steven)

21/05/24 imm Paices Wood CP coppice SU585640 also 02/09 (JL)

17/08/24 toadlet Fifty Acre Piece SU631649 (RDNHS trip leader Alan Holmes)

30/10/24 toadlet Paices Wood CP glade SU584638 (JL)

Smooth Newt - *Lissotriton vulgaris*

04/04/24 Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse SU601703 (JP)
27/05/24 fem Tilehurst garden pond SU665742 (JL)
08/07/24 Tilehurst garden under refuge and small m and fem 16/07 SU665742 (JL)
27/09/24 ad m Tilehurst garden SU665742 (JL)

Palmate Newt - *Lissotriton helveticus*
15/03/24 (5) & 18/03/24 Paices Wood CP dipping pond SU58416367 (JL)

Common Frog – *Rana temporaria*
09/02/24 4 Tilehurst in garden pond SU666742 (JH)
18/02/24 11 Tilehurst garden SU66742 (JH)
19/02/24 first spawn Tilehurst SU666742 (JH)
05/03/24 ads and spawn in pond Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse SU601703 (JP)
15/05/24 Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse pond SU601703 (LB)
24/04/24 imm Bradfield, Rushall Farm SU585727 (JL)
21/05/24 imm Paices Wood CP coppice SU585640 & 4 in Glade SU584638 (JL)
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation SU760615 (RDNHS trip leader RS)
24/06/24 froglet in garden, tadpoles in pond Bradfield Southend SU593704 (LB)
03/07/24 Hardwick Estate, Path Hill SU655782 (RDNHS trip leader Cathy Harris)
13/07/24 ad Tilehurst, Oaktree Rd allotment SU67097489 (JL)
17/07/24 Bradfield Southend garden SU593704 (JP)
21/08/24 Loddon Reserve SU783756 (RDHNS trip leader Fiona Brown)
18/09/24 imm Moulsford SU593894 (RDNHS trip leader RS)
02/12/24 orange ad Paices Wood CP glade SU584638 (JL)

Pool Frog – *Pelophylax lessonae*
22/06/24 many Bramshill Plantation loud chorus SU754621 (RDNHS trip leader RS)

REPTILES

Slow-worm – *Anguis fragilis*
19/02/24 ad m dark brown Padworth Common Reserve SU61926447 (JL)
26/02/24 long young ad fem Tilehurst, Oaktree Rd allotment & ad fem 01/05 SU67097489 (JL)
13/03/24 Pamber Forest SU618612 (RDNHS trip leader JH)
15/03/24 fem Paices Wood CP heath SU58316370 (JL)
18/03/24 & 02/04 Paices Wood CP glade SU58386380 (JL)
23/03/24 Withymead Nature Reserve under refuge SU601827 (RDNHS trip leader Sean O'Leary)
03/04/24 Tilehurst in compost heap SU666742 (JH)
12/04/24 Bradfield, Owlpit Copse SU583735 (JP)
27/04/24 3 under refuges Bowdown Woods Reserve SU508655 (RDNHS trip leader Roger Dobbs)
14/05/24 ad Paices Wood CP heath SU583636 (JL, D&N Massie)
18/06/24 6 all imm of different sizes Tilehurst garden and 7 imm 07/07 SU665742 (JL)
08/07/24 3 ad fems Padworth Lane GP SU616686 (JL)
09/08/24 imm Bradfield, Owlpit Copse SU585733 (JP)
03/09/24 yng ad fem Winterbourne Wood SU444721 (JL)

08/11/24 imm Tilehurst, Oaktree Rd allotment SU67097489 (JL)

Common Lizard – *Zootoca vivipara*
17/08/24 Fifty Acre Piece SU631649 (RDNHS trip leader Alan Holmes)

Grass Snake – *Natrix helvetica*
20/05/24 ad Bradfield, Rushall Farm pond SU584723 (anon)
06/07/24 ad Paices Wood CP glade SU583638 (JL)
17/07/24 caught in mower Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse SU599700 (LB)
17/08/24 seen swimming on RDNHS trip Fifty Acre Piece SU631648 (Harry Matthews)
21/08/24 dead ad Loddon Reserve SU783756 (Tom Walker)
18/09/24 Theale SU649710 (Lynne & Harry Matthews)
18/09/24 Moulsford SU595830 (RDNHS trip leader RS)

BIRDS

Mandarin Duck - *Aix galericulata*
12/02/24 3 Moor Copse Reserve, Bartons Field SU638736 (Ailsa Claybourn)

Little Egret - *Egretta garzetta*
20/01/25 & 29/12/25 Whiteknights Park SU737723 (David Owens)
27/01/24 Whiteknights Lake SU737718 (RG)

Red Kite – *Milvus milvus*
02/04/24 Pair gathering nest material Victoria Recreation Ground SU672747 (KJ)
15/04/24 65 over Portman Road, Reading SU6974 (KJ)

Buzzard – *Buteo buteo*
April 2024 2 Nesting pair in a local garden SU7571 (TM)
18/04/24 Basildon Park flew very close SU604714 (RG, CW)

Ring-necked Parakeet – *Psittacula krameri*
01/11/24 to 31/12/25 regular sightings over Tilehurst SU665737 (KJ)
11/11/24 on garden feeder, first for garden, SU665742, now regular reports around Tilehurst and Theale area (JL)

Swift – *Apus apus*
11/27/24 Wallingford flock in town centre SU606895 (RG)

Skylark – *Alauda arvensis*
31/07/24 empty nest Sulham Woodmeadows, Saddlers Field SU652744 (JL)

Woodlark – *Lullula arborea*
06/03/24 & 18/03 singing Paices Wood CP SU5863 (JL)

Mistle Thrush – *Turdus viscivorus*
18/04/24 Basildon Park singing SU604714 (RG, CW)

Nightingale - *Lucinia megarhynchos*
May 2024 Hosehill LNR six birds present on one date SU6469/6569 (JL)

Stonechat – *Saxicola torquatus*
17/02/24 pair, Earth Trust, Little Whittenham SU5494 (KJ)

Marsh Tit - *Poecile palustris*
15/03/24 Paices Wood SU583634 (JL)

Treecreeper – *Certhia familiaris*
25/08/24 Withymead Nature Reserve SU601827 (RG, CW, Fiona Brown)

Raven – *Corvus corax*
30/06/24 Childrey Warren SU3485 (JL)
01/11/24 to 31/12/24 reg over Tilehurst SU665737 (KJ)

Siskin – *Spinus spinus*
Dec 2024 regular to 600 Moor Copse SU6374 (Ailsa Claybourn)

Yellowhammer – *Emberiza citonella*
30/06/24 2 Childrey Warren SU3485 (JL)
06/11/24 Seven Barrows SU329828 (JL)

MAMMALS

Rodents - *Rodentia*

Grey Squirrel - *Sciurus carolinensis*
16/01/24 4 feeding close together near bus stop Prospect Park SU69217300 (JL)
17/07/24 Reading Old Cemetery SU735732 (T Verney-Brookes)
01/09/24 with reddish fur Lambourn SU33058124 (JL)
01/09/24 reddish fur Watts Bank SU33117719 (JL)

Brown Rat -*Rattus norvegicus*
19/01/24 ad Tilehurst garden; imm 30/01 SU665742 & sightings in March, (JL)
01/04/24 Bradfield Southend, SU591703 (LB)
31/05/24 few around pond, Tilehurst, Prospect Park SU690727 (JL)
27/07/24 Earley Gate, University of Reading near former bowling green SU742718 (RG, CW)
20/08/24 Fobney Island SU703711 (JL)
26/08/24 burrow in field edge Sulham Woodmeadows, Stoneham Farm SU65107501 (JL)
17/11/24 dead on M4 Maidenhatch SU629737 (JL)

Wood Mouse - *Apodemus sylvaticus*
27/06/24 4 trapped in garage over four days Tilehurst SU665742 (JL)
03/08/24 Tilehurst garden SU665742 (JL)

Hazel Dormouse - *Muscardinus avellanarius*
16/12/24 Moor Copse Reserve, Arable Field in hay bale SU63437371 (H Darby)

Bank Vole - *Myodes glareolus*
06/03/24 2 Paices Wood CP SU585635 (JL)
06/03/24 chewed cherry stones under refuge Hosehill LNR 648694 (JL)
18/04/24 Paices Wood CP SU58626357 (JL)
30/06/24 Childrey Warren, car park SU340853 (JL)
02/09/24 imm Piaces Wood CP SU585640 (JL)
09/09/24 Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse SU599701 (LB)
01/12 24 Lambourn, White Shute Way SU32757787 (JL)

Rabbits & Hares – *Lagomorpha*

Brown Hare - *Lepus europaeus*
02/02/24 Englefield SU62067058 (JL)
23/03/24 3 boxing, Englefield SU73487319 (JL)
12/04/24 Watts Bank Reserve SU33097716 (JL)
14/04/24 Eastbury, SU34877604 (JL)
11/05/24 Seven Barrows Reserve SU329828 (JL)
22/06/25 7 in field, Hermitage SU5073 (KJ)
08/09/24 East Garston SU35807683 (JL)

Rabbit - *Oryctolagus cuniculus*
07/01/24 Decoy Heath Reserve SU61346348 (JL)
31/03/24 juv Lambourn SU329814 (JL)
07/01/24 Decoy Heath Reserve SU613633 (JL)
05/07/24 Fobney SU704709 (A&JB)
15/09/24 juv Lambourn Woodlands SU314764 (JL)
06/10/24 Lambourn Woodlands SU33687729 (JL)

Hedgehogs - *Erinaceomorpha*

Hedgehog - *Erinaceus europaeus*
21/04/24 Lambourn SU333782 (JL)
03/11/24 dead on road Wickham Green SU402725 (JL)

Shrews & Moles - *Soricomorpha*

Common Shrew – *Sorex araneus*
04/05/24 Paices Wood CP SU585635 (JL)

18/06/24 Basildon Park dead specimen SU609776 (RG, CW)
20/06/24 Morgaston Wood, Hants crossing path SU629569 (RG, CW)
21/08/24 ad Hosehill LNR meadow SU650697 (JL)

Water Shrew - *Neomys fodiens*
05/07/24 Fobney, dead on path SU698711 (A&JB)

Mole - *Talpa europaea*
01/04/24 several hills, Bradfield, Owlpit Copse SU58672 (JP)
29/05/24 dead on path with many fly larvae, Hosehill LNR SU646696 (JL)
18/08/24 new hills on grassy patch Bradfield, Greathouse Wood SU689735 (JP)
04/11/24 several new hills Moor Copse, Cottage Field SU63697359 (JL)
30/08/24 Calcot, Pincents Field SU656724 (JL)

Bats - *Chiroptera*

Serotine - *Eptiseccus serotinus*
05/08/24 Bradfield Southend, Admoor Copse, detector SU599704 (LB, CH)

Noctule - *Nyctalus noctula*
05/08/24 Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse, detector SU599704 (LB, CH)

Common Pipistrelle - *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*
18/02/24 Earley in garden, warm weather will have confused them SU735710 (RG, CW)
05/08/24 Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse, detector SU598702 & nearby sites (LB, CH)

Soprano Pipistrelle - *Pipstrellus pygmaeus*
05/08/24 Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse, detector SU599703 (LB, CH)
22/08/24 Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse, detedctor SU602699 (LB, CH)

Nathusius Pipistrelle – *Pipistrellus nathusii*
07/10/24 St Michaels Churchyard, Tilehurst SU673729 (KJ)

Brown Long-eared Bat - *Plecatus auratus*
05/08/24 Bradfield Southend, Admoor Copse, detector SU599704 (LB, CH)
22/08/24 Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse, detector SU602699 (LB, CH)

Carnivores – *Canivora*

Fox – *Vulpes vulpes*
25/01/24 Tilehurst, Westwood Rd SU666742 (JH)
27/01/24 Sulham Woodmeadows, Saddlers Field SU650740 (JH)
29/03/24 Earley, also on other dates different individuals sleeping or running in garden SU735710 (RG)
31/03/24 Englefield A4 SU618738 (JL)

17/05/24 cub dead on road, Englefield SU632708 (JL)
30/10/24 Tilehurst, ad carrying prey, probably squirrel, on trail camera SU6575 (Ian Duddle)
22/05/24 Tilehurst, Kentwood in garden SU673747 (J Berry)
16/07/24 imm around garden for much of last two nights SU593704 (LB)
07/08/24 Tilehurst, Oaktree Rd allotment made home under Buddleja SU67097439 (JL)
17/11/24 Oare SU506744 (JL)
22/11/24 Purley SU65687621 (JL)

Carnivores - *Mustelidae*

Badger - *Meles meles*
06/02/24 skull found Paices Wood SU5863 (JL)
11/02/24 imm roadkill Lambourn, SU3178 (JL)
10/03/24 ad Upper Bucklebury SU530692 (JL)
31/03/24 Chieveley SU455731 (JL)
12/04/24 sett with fresh bedding Watts Bank Reserve SU3377 (JL)
30/06/24 imm, dead on road, Lambourn, Coppington Hill SU3278 (JL)
08/07/24 Tidmarsh, roadkill SU6374 (JL)
01/09/24 ad Seven Barrows Reserve SU3282 (JL)
05/10 24 portions of skin and hair found Hosehill LNR SU648694 (JL)
03/11/24 dead swollen roadkill East Garston SU6469 (JL)

Weasel - *Mustela nivalis*
17/03/24 Hosehill LNR SU649694 (S Graham)

Stoat - *Mustela erminea*
09/01/24 Englefield SU622702 (JL)
08/05/24 Sonning Common running along field margin SU720810 (Louise Knight)
23/06/24 Aldworth, Starvall road SU5580 (KJ)

Otter - *Lutra lutra*
12/02/24 prints on Mink raft Moor Copse SU6374 (Ailsa Claybourn)
06/03/24 Streatley SU644766 (N Bucknell)
18/09/24 Theale, dead at roadworks M4 J12 westbound SU649710 (Lynne & Harry Matthews)
18/09/24 Moulsford many spraints found along Thames bank containing shell & claws of American Signal Crayfish SU595830 (RDNHS trip leader RS)

Deer - *Artiodactyla – Cervidae*

Chinese Muntjac - *Muntiacus reevesi*
27/01/24 2 calling Hosehill LNR N and S of Butterfly Bank SUSU648694 (JL)
01/02/24 Wokefield Common SU65136630 (JL)
04/02/24 Tidmarsh M4 grazing on hard shoulder SU6472 (JH)
27/02/24 Reading Old Cemetery, regular here SU73487319 (T Verney-Brookes)
27/04/24 Bowdown Woods Reserve SU499657 (RDNHS trip leader Roger Dobbs)

09/05/24 Fobney SU703709 (A&JB)
15/05/24 Bradfield Southend SU592697 (LB)
25/05/24 & 09/08 Bradfield, Owlpit Copse SU586731 (JP)
10/07/24 Bradfield, Greathouse Wood SU588734 (JP)
20/07/24 Yoesden Bank Reserve SU788981 (RDNHS trip leader Inge Beck)
14/07/24 Radley Bottom SU36816921 (JL)
05/08/24 ad fem pregnant crossed road Streatley, The Holies SU59947056 (JL)
21/08/24 dead on road, one of at least four road casualties here this year, Tidmarsh near Moor Copse SU633737 (JL)
27/08/24 Hermitage garden SU507731 (C Genge)
10/09/24 Bradfield, Owlpit Copse SU587730 (JP)
15/09/24 imm Ragnal SU313741 (JL)
17/09/24 Moor Copse Reserve SU63307367 also 11/10 SU63327391 (JL)
26/09/24 Tilehurst, Barefoots Copse SU65487439 (JL)
05/10 24 crossed road Sulhamstead SU63736949 (JL)
05/ & 07/10/24 Tilehurst 1am in garden trying to get through badger hole in side gate SU66507423 (JL)
27/10/24 Watts Bank Reserve SU33107722 (JL)
25/11/24 ad fem Tilehurst garden SU665742 (JL)
03/12/24 Sulham Hill SU64517446 (JL)
26/12/24 m Padworth SU61796540 (JL)

Roe Deer - *Capreolus capreolus*
07/01/24 ad Decoy Heath Reserve SU611633 (JL)
21/01/24 Theale, Wigmore Lane, Osier Lake, droppings SU63837014 (JL)
08/03/24 large ad fem Wokefield Common SU65626609 (JL)
10/03/24 2 ads Sulham Hill SU64497441 occasional sightings in this field (JL)
14/04/24 ad fem in maize patch, Woodland St Mary SU343758 (JL)
17/04/24 5 Barkham, The Coombes SU772676 (RDNHS trip leader Fiona Brown)
15/05/24 Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse SU599700 (LB)
29/09/24 buck barking near garden for half hour. Tilehurst SU6674 (RB)
17/06/24 ad fem Bradfield, Owlpit Copse SU584735 (JP)
24/06/24 Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse SU598702 (LB)
21/06/24 Bradfield, Owlpit Copse SU586731 (JP)
30/06/24 Childrey Warren, Crowhole Bottom SU3584 (JL)
10/07/24 4 Bradfield, Owlpit Copse SU584735 (JP)
18/07/24 Bothampstead 513750 (JL)
02/08/24 2 Moor Copse Reserve SU635736 (JL)
01/09/24 ad & juv Bartely Heath reserve SU730534 (RDNHS trip leader Julia Cooper & Ian Duddle)
01/09/24 imm Lambourn, Coppington Hill SU321779 (JL)
10/09/24 Bradfield, Owlpit Cospe SU585733, also 21/09/24 SU586731 (JP)
20/10/24 Sulham Woodmeadows SU654757 (RDNHS trip leader David Owens)
27/10/24 fem Watts Bank Reserve SU33117721 (JL)
30/10/24 skeleton but less than one year dead Paices Wood CP glade SU583638 (JL)

22/11/24 ad fem ran round field twice then escaped under gate Moor Copse Reserve, Arable Field SU634737 (JL)

Fallow Deer - *Dama dama*

28/01/24 7 Seven Barrows Reserve SU332828 (JL)
10/03/24 doe and young buck East Garston Downs, Oakridge Copse SU381788 (JL)
06/04/24 30 Swains Wood Reserve SU741916 (RDNHS trip leader Sally Brown)
17/04/24 9 Barkham SU782669 (RDNHS trip leader Fiona Brown)
29/05/24 antler found near bark-stripped Hornbeam, Hosehill LNR SU65016937 (JL)
08/08/24 5 Bradfield, Rushall Farm SU578725 (JP)
13/10/24 dead by road, many maggots Chaddleworth SU41357612 (JL)
21/12/24 dead by road Dunsden Green SU738771 (JL)

Botany Report for 2024

By **Renée Grayer**

The summer of 2024 was characterised by periods of high rainfall alternated by hot dry days. This was good weather for certain wild plants, such as grasses, ivy and brambles, but some smaller and more delicate plants tended to be smothered by their stronger competitors

The 4th edition of C.A. Stace's New Flora of the British Isles (2019) has been followed for the scientific and British names of the plant species and for the taxonomic arrangement of the species into families and higher categories. The Flora of Berkshire by M. J. Crawley (2005) was generally used for the selection of the species to be reported, using rarity or decline in their occurrence as criteria. Whenever a species was recorded during a RDNHS trip or walk, often the name of the excursion leader is given after the record, even if another member of the group discovered the plant. The initials of the contributors or the RDNHS trip or walk leaders are given at the end of each record in brackets. Other abbreviations are explained at the end of the Report.

CALAMOPHYTES

Equisetaceae

***Equisetum telmateia* - Great Horsetail**
06/07/24 Paices Wood Country Park (RN trip) SU586640 (JL)

LEPTOSPRANGIATE FERNS (TRUE FERNS)

Aspleniaceae

***Asplenium ruta-muraria* - Wall-rue**
30/11/24 Silchester Roman Walls (RN trip) SU641621 (SW)
11/12/24 Churn, Dismantled Railway (RN walk) SU518823 (JC & ID)

Dryoperidaceae

***Polystichum setiferum* - Soft Shield-fern**
21/02/24 Cornwell Copse, Little Heath (RN walk) SU657741 (RS)
22/09/24 Wildmoor nr Sherfield-on-Loddon (RN trip) SU691559 (AB)
30/11/24 Silchester Roman Walls (RN trip) SU635622 (SW)

***Polystichum aculeatum* - Hard Shield-fern**
21/02/24 Cornwell Copse, Little Heath (RN walk) SU657741 (RS)
13/03/24 Pamber Forest (RN walk) SU616612 (JH)
22/09/24 Wildmoor nr Sherfield-on-Loddon (RN trip) SU691559 (AB)

***Dryopteris affinis* - Scaly Male-fern**
13/03/24 Mariner's Copse, Pamber Forest (RN walk) SU616602 (JH)

ANGIOSPERMS

Ranunculaceae

***Helleborus viridis* - Green Hellebore**
06/07/24 Paices Wood, Industrial Fence SU58896371 (JL)

***Ranunculus auricomus* - Goldilocks Buttercup**
06/04/24 Northend, Holloway Lane (RN trip) SU738923 (SR)
08/05/24 Blackmore Lane, Sonning Common (RN walk) SU713802 (FC)

***Ranunculus sceleratus* - Celery-leaved Buttercup**
18/04/24 Paices Wood, top park SU58726361 (JL)

***Ranunculus aquaticus* - Common Water-crowfoot**
13/04/24 Sulham, Saddlers Farm SU64927434 (JL)

Saxifragaceae

***Saxifraga tridactylitis* - Rue-leaved Saxifrage**
18/05/24 Aldermaston Gravel Pits NE (RN trip) SU599668 (GS)

***Chrysosplenium oppositifolium* - Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage**
27/04/24 Bowdown Woods BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SU505657 (RD)
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU565618 (JC & ID)

Crassulaceae

***Umbilicus rupestris* – Navelwort**
30/11/24 Silchester Roman Walls (RN trip) SU635622 (SW)

***Sedum acre* - Biting Stonecrop**
20/06/24 Hampstead Norreys SU545763 (JL)
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation (RN trip) SU754615 (RS)

***Hylotelephium telephium* – Orpine**
18/05/24 Paices Wood SU58536395 (JL)

Fabaceae

***Galega officinalis* - Goat's-rue**
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation (RN trip) SU754614 (RS)

***Hippocrepis comosa* - Horseshoe Vetch**
19/05/24 Grog Hill SU320834 and SU322834 (JL)

***Vicia sylvatica* - Wood Vetch**
10/08/24 Dancers End BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SP90000934(MJ)

***Lathyrus nissolia* - Grass Vetchling**
01/06/24 University of Reading nr RSSL Building, several specimens SU737715 (RG & CW)
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation, at least 8 specimens (RN trip) SU752618 (RS)

***Lathyrus linifolius* – Bitter-vetch**
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation (RN trip) SU75846210 (RS)

***Lupinus arboreus* - Tree Lupin**
18/05/24 Aldermaston Gravel Pits NE (RN trip) SU596668 (GS)

***Genista anglica* - Petty Whin**
01/09/24 Bartley Heath HIWWT Reserve, around base of pylon (RN trip) SU728534 (JC & ID)

***Genista tinctoria* - Dyer's Greenweed**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU563620 (JC & ID)

***Ulex minor* - Dwarf Gorse**
01/09/24 Bartley Heath HIWWT Reserve (RN trip) SU728534 (JC & ID)
20/11/24 Pangbourne Meadows (RN walk) SU639758 (RS)

Polygalaceae

***Polygala calcarea* - Chalk Milkwort**
26/05/24 Cleeve Hill, Strawberry Field SU333766 (SJ)

Rosaceae

***Sorbus torminalis* - Wild Service-tree**
21/02/24 Copse NW of Cornwell Copse, Little Heath (RN walk) SU656742 (RS)
13/03/24 Pamber Forest (RN walk) SU616609 (JH)

***Agrimonia procera* - Fragrant Agrimony**
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation (RN trip) SU752617 (RS)

Hypericaceae

***Hypericum elodes* - Marsh St John's-wort**
01/09/24 Bartley Heath HIWWT Reserve (RN trip) SU729534 (JC & ID)

***Hypericum humifusum* – Trailing St John's-wort**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU565621 (JC & ID)

***Hypericum pulchrum* - Slender St John's-wort**
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation (RN trip) SU75356212 (RS)

Geraniaceae

***Geranium columbinum* – Long-stalked Crane's-bill**
05/06/24 Chiltern Way, Bockmer End (RN walk) SU818866 (JW)

***Geranium versicolor* – Pencilled Crane's-bill**
14/06/24 Paices Wood, top park SU58606363 (JL)

Lythraceae

***Lythrum portula* - Water-purslane**
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation (RN trip) SU754621 (RS)
17/08/24 Fifty Acre Piece, Padworth Common (RN trip) SU631649 (AH)
01/09/24 Bartley Heath HIWWT Reserve (RN trip) SU731534 (JC & ID)

Malvaceae

***Malva moschata* - Musk Mallow**
06/07/24 Paices Wood Country Park, specimens with white flowers (RN trip) SU585632 (JL)
10/08/24 Dancers End BBOWT Reserve, white flowered (RN trip) SP905088 (MJ)

***Malva neglecta* - Dwarf Mallow**
22/09/24 Wildmoor nr Sherfield-on-Loddon (RN trip) SU681548 (AB)

Thymelaeaceae

***Daphne laureola* - Spurge-laurel**
20/06/24 Morgaston Wood NT, Hampshire SU62615670 (RG & CW)

Polygonaceae

***Persicaria amphibia* - Amphibious Bistort**
18/09/24 Cleeve, Thames Park (RN walk) SU599825 (RS)
22/09/24 Wildmoor nr Sherfield-on-Loddon (RN trip) SU692556 (AB)

***Persicaria lapathifolia* - Pale Persicaria**
10/08/25 Univ. of Reading, Whiteknights, south side of small bridge SU737718 (RG & CW)

***Fallopia convolvulus* - Black-bindweed**
22/09/24 Wildmoor nr Sherfield-on-Loddon (RN trip) SU686550 (AB)

***Reynoutria japonica* - Japanese Knotweed**
11/07/24 Welford (JL) SU41037343

***Rumex hydrolapathum* - Water Dock**
18/05/24 Aldermaston Gravel Pits NE (RN trip) SU594667 (GS)
18/09/24 Moulsford, Thames Park (RN walk) SU597828 (RS)

Caryophyllaceae

***Arenaria serpyllifolia* - Thyme-leaved Sandwort**
18/05/24 Aldermaston Gravel Pits NE (RN trip) SU599668 (GS)

***Moehringia trinervia* - Three-nerved Sandwort**
17/04/24 The Coombes, Arborfield (RN walk) SU772675 (FB)
27/04/24 Bowdown Woods BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SU507656 (RD)
08/05/24 Flowercroft Wood, Sonning Common (RN walk) SU725810 (FC)

***Stellaria alsine* - Bog Stitchwort**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU565618 and SU565621 (JC & ID)

***Stellaria palustris* - Marsh Stitchwort**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU557623 (JC & ID)

***Spergula arvensis* - Corn Spurrey**
03/07/24 Collinsend Common, Hardwick Estate, many specimens (RN walk) SU660786 (CH)

Montiaceae

***Montia fontana* – Blinks**
18/05/24 Aldermaston Gravel Pits NE (RN trip) SU594667 (GS)

Balsaminaceae

***Impatiens capensis* - Orange Balsam**
02/08/24 Fobney, South shore SU70307103 (JL)
18/09/24 Cleeve, Thames Park (RN walk) SU599825 (RS)

Primulaceae

Hottonia palustris - Water-violet
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU564619 (JC & ID)

***Lysimachia punctata* - Dotted Loosestrife**
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation, big stand of naturalised plants (RN trip) SU759623 (RS)

***Lysimachia tenella* - Bog Pimpernel**
01/09/24 Bartley Heath HIWWT Reserve (RN trip) SU729534 (JC & ID)

Ericaceae

***Erica tetralix* - Cross-leaved Heath**
17/08/24 Fifty Acre Piece, Padworth Common (RN trip) SU631649 (AH)
01/09/24 Bartley Heath HIWWT Reserve (RN trip) SU728534 (JC & ID)

***Vaccinium myrtillus* – Bilberry**
13/03/24 Pamber Forest (RN walk) SU616612 (JH)

Rubiaceae

***Galium palustre* - Common Marsh-bedstraw**
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation (RN trip) SU752617 (RS)

***Galium parisiense* - Wall Bedstraw**
18/05/24 Aldermaston Gravel Pits NE (RN trip) SU599668 (GS)

***Galium saxatile* - Heath Bedstraw**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU563620 (JC & ID)

Gentianaceae

***Gentianella germanica* - Chiltern Gentian**
10/08/24 Dancers End BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SP905088 (MJ)

***Gentiana pneumonanthe* - Marsh Gentian**
01/09/24 Bartley Heath HIWWT Reserve (RN trip) SU728534 (JC & ID)

Boraginaceae

***Lithospermum officinale* - Common Gromwell**
17/05/24 Paices Wood SU58486395 (JL)
26/05/24 Lambourn Woodland, Cleeve Bank SU33267666 and SU33227657 (JL)
26/05/24 Cleeve Hill, Strawberry Field SU333766 (JL)
18/06/24 Basildon Park NT, 7 specimens SU 60877746 (RG & CW)
03/07/24 Path Hill, Hardwick Estate (RN walk) SU665782 (CH)

Solanaceae

***Atropa belladonna* - Deadly Nightshade**
10/08/24 Dancers End BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SP902089 (MJ)

***Hyoscyamus niger* – Henbane**
11/07/24 Boxford SU433725 (JL)

Veronicaceae

***Veronica scutellata* - Marsh Speedwell**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU566617 (JC & ID)
01/09/24 Bartley Heath HIWWT Reserve (RN trip) SU729534 (JC & ID)

***Veronica catenata* – Pink Water-speedwell**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU559621 (JC & ID)

***Linaria repens* - Pale Toadflax**
16/10/24 Hailey nr Wallingford (RN walk) SU647860 (JH)

***Chaenorhinum minus* - Small Toadflax**
10/08/24 Dancers End BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SP905088 (MJ)

***Misopates orontium* - Weasel's-snout**
03/07/24 Collinsend Common, Hardwick Estate, 1 specimen (RN walk) SU660786 (CH)

***Kickxia elatine* - Sharp-leaved Fluellen**
16/10/24 Bachelor's Hill, Hailey nr Wallingford (RN walk) SU647870 (JH)

Callitrichaceae

***Callitriche* species (unidentified) - Water-starwort**
01/09/24 Bartley Heath HIWWT Reserve, damp area beneath bridge (RN trip) SU731534 (JC & ID)

Scrophulariaceae

***Verbascum thapsus* - Great Mullein**
30/03/24 Theale, Wigmore Lane SU63367025 (JL)
06/07/24 Paices Wood Country Park (RN trip) SU583633 (JL)
10/08/24 Univ. of Reading, Whiteknights, south side of small bridge SU737718 (RG & CW)
30/11/24 Silchester Roman Walls (RN trip) SU639627 (SW)

Lamiaceae

***Scutellaria minor* - Lesser Skullcap**
01/09/24 Bartley Heath HIWWT Reserve (RN trip) SU729534 (JC & ID)

***Scutellaria galericulata* – Skullcap**
10/08/24 Univ. of Reading, Whiteknights, south side of small bridge SU737718 (RG & CW)

***Mentha pulegium* – Pennyroyal**
18/05/24 Aldermaston Gravel Pits NE (RN trip) SU596668 (GS)

Orobanchaceae

***Melampyrum pratense* - Common Cow-wheat**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU566620 (JC & ID)
20/06/24 Morgaston Wood NT, Hampshire, SU63365684 (RG & CW)

***Orobanche minor* - Common Broomrape**
21/07/24 Welford, SU414738 (JL)

***Orobanche rapum-genistae* - Greater Broomrape**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU563620 (JC & ID)

Campanulaceae

***Campanula alliariifolia* - Cornish Bellflower**
30/06/24 Ridge Way, Devil's Punch bowl SU351848 (JL)

***Campanula glomerata* - Clustered Bellflower**
10/08/24 Dancers End BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SP905088 (MJ)
11/12/24 Ridgeway nr Lowbury Hill (RN walk) still flowering SU526823 (JC & ID)

***Campanula trachelium* - Nettle-leaved Bellflower**

20/07/24 Yoesden Bank BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SU789978 IB)
29/07/24 Watts Bank Reserve SU33147706 (JL)
10/08/24 Dancers End BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SP902089 (MJ)
30/11/24 Silchester Roman Walls (RN trip) SU635622 (SW)

Asteraceae

***Cirsium eriophorum* - Woolly Thistle**
30/06/24 Ridge Way, Devil's Punch bowl SU351848 (JL)

***Jacobaea aquatica* - Marsh Ragwort**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU562621 (JC & ID)

***Filago germanica* - Common Cudweed**
06/07/24 Sulham Wood Meadows, Stoneham Farm SU64657527 (JL)

***Achillea ptarmica* - Sneezewort**
07/08/24 Averys Pightle SU435651 (JL)
10/08/24 Univ. of Reading, Whiteknights, many specimens in wet field SU737717 (RG & CW)

01/09/24 Bartley Heath HIWWT Reserve (RN trip) SU729534 and SU732534 (JC & ID)
18/09/24 Moulsford, Thames Park (RN walk) SU597828 (RS)

***Glebionis segetum* - Corn Marigold**
07/05/24 Sulham Wood Meadows, Stoneham Farm SU646752 (JL)

Adoxaceae

***Adoxa moschatellina* – Moschatel**
21/02/24 Barefoot Copse, Little Heath (RN walk) SU656744 (RS)
27/04/24 Bowdown Woods BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SU507656 (RD)

Dipsacaceae

***Dipsacus pilosus* - Small Teasel**
30/11/24 Silchester Roman Walls (RN trip) SU635622 (SW)

Apiaceae

***Sanicula europaea* - Sanicle**
21/02/24 Sulham Woods (RN walk) SU644746 (RS)
06/04/24 Northend, Holloway Lane (RN trip) SU738923 (SR)
17/04/24 The Coombes, Arborfield (RN walk) SU772675 (FB)
05/06/24 Marlow Common (RN walk) SU824870 (JW)
20/06/24 Morgaston Wood NT, Hampshire SU62635654 (RG & CW)

***Oenanthe fistulosa* - Tubular Water-dropwort**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU557623 (JC & ID)

***Conopodium majus* - Pignut**
21/02/24 Barefoot Copse, Little Heath (RN walk) SU656744 (RS)
27/04/24 Bowdown Woods BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SU506656 (RD)
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU563620 (JC & ID)
28/05/24 Inkpen Crocus Field SU37026405 (JL)

***Sison amomum* - Stone Parsley**
08/05/24 Blounts Farm, Sonning Common (RN walk) SU721810 (FC)
28/07/24 Bradfield Southend, Holly Copse, meadow SU595700 (JL)

***Angelica sylvestris* - Wild Angelica**
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR (RN trip) SU564619 and SU566617 (JC & ID)
20/06/24 Morgaston Wood NT, Hampshire SU63395672 (RG & CW)
10/08/24 Dancers End BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SP905088 and SP902089 (MJ)
21/08/24 Charvil Country Park (RN walk) SU781755 (FB)
18/09/24 Moulsford, Thames Park (RN walk) SU594834 (RS)

22/09/24 Wildmoor nr Sherfield-on-Loddon (RN trip) SU692556 (AB)

Acoraceae

***Acorus calamus* - Sweet-flag**
10/08/24 Univ. of Reading, Whiteknights, NE side of the Lake SU738728 (RG & CW)

Potamogetonaceae

***Potamogeton nodosus* - Loddon Pondweed**
21/08/24 Loddon Nature Reserve (RN walk) SU783756 (FB)

Orchidaceae

***Cephalanthera damasonium* - White Helleborine**
05/06/24 Homefield Wood, not yet in flower (RN walk) SU812868 (JW)

***Neottia nidus-avis* - Bird's-nest Orchid**
05/06/24 Homefield Wood (RN walk) SU813868 (JW)

***Neottia ovata* - Common Twayblade**
08/05/24 Flowercroft Wood, Sonning Common (RN walk) SU725810 (FC)
26/05/24 Cleeve Hill, Strawberry Field SU333766 (JL)
26/05/24 Lambourn Woodlands, Cleeve Bank SU332765 (JL)
26/05/24 Lambourn, Crog Hill SU323835 (JL)
05/06/24 Homefield Wood (RN walk) SU813867 (JW)

***Platanthera chlorantha* - Greater Butterfly-orchid**
05/06/24 Homefield Wood (RN walk) SU813867 (JW)

***Gymnadenia conopsea* - Chalk Fragrant-orchid**
06/04/24 Swain's Wood BBOWT Reserve, leaves only (RN trip) SU739920 (SR)
20/07/24 Yoesden Bank BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SU789979 (IB)

***Dactylorhiza maculata* - Heath-spotted Orchid**
25/05/24 Greyfield Wood, may be a hybrid swarm with *D. fuchsii* SU58236899 (JL)
25/05/24 Ashford Hill NNR, hybrid swarm with *D. fuchsii* (RN trip) SU563620 (JC & ID)
16/06/24 Lambourn Woodlands, Thornhill Bottom SU33127652 (JL)

***Dactylorhiza praetermissa* - Southern Marsh-orchid**
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation, hybrid swarm with *D. fuchsii* (RN trip) SU752614 (RS)

***Orchis mascula* - Early-purple Orchid**
24/04/24 Bradfield, Long Copse SU58017281 (JL)
24/04/24 Rushall Farm, Round Copse SU58547259 (JL)

***Orchis militaris* - Military Orchid**

06/04/24 Swain's Wood BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SU739920 (SR)

05/06/24 Homefield Wood (RN walk) SU813867 and SU812868 (JW)

***Anacamptis pyramidalis* - Pyramidal Orchid**

01/06/24 University of Reading, Whiteknights nr Bridges Hall SU741720 (RG & CW)

05/06/24 Chiltern Way, Bockmer End (RN walk) SU818866 (JW)

18/06/24 Basildon Park NT, 8 specimens SU60687724 (RG & CW)

22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation, many specimens (RN trip) SU75856199 (RS)

03/07/24 Collinsend Common, Hardwick Estate, 2 specimens (RN walk) SU662787 (CH)

03/07/24 Path Hill, Hardwick Estate (RN walk) SU665784 (CH)

04/07/24 Pamber Heath SU61876183 (SJ)

11/07/24 Reading Old Cemetery SU733731 (SJ)

20/07/24 Yoesden Bank BBOWT Reserve (RN trip) SU789978 (IB)

***Ophrys apifera* - Bee Orchid**

05/06/24 Homefield Wood (RN walk) SU813867 (JW)

07/06/24 University of Reading nr RSSL Building, 12 specimens SU737716 (RG & CW)

12/06/24 Paices Wood, industrial fence SU58856373 (JL)

18/06/24 Basildon Park NT, 2 specimens SU 60547716 (RG & CW)

22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation (RN trip) SU75276234 and SU754615 (RS)

06/07/24 Paices Wood Country Park (RN trip) SU583633 (JL)

***Ophrys insectifera* - Fly Orchid**

05/06/24 Homefield Wood (RN walk) SU812868 (JW)

Iridaceae

***Sisyringhium striatum* – Pale Yellow-eyed-grass**

14/06/24 Paices Wood, Industrial Fence SU588637 (JL)

Amaryllidaceae

***Narcissus pseudonarcissus* - Wild Daffodil**

13/03/24 Mariner's Copse, Pamber Forest (RN walk) SU616600 (JH)

Asparagaceae

***Ruscus aculeatus* - Butcher's-broom**

21/02/24 Copse NW of Cornwell Copse, Little Heath (RN walk) SU655742 (RS)

20/10/24 Sulham Woods (RN trip) SU650754 (DO)

Typhaceae

***Sparganium erectum* - Branched Bur-reed**
18/09/24 Moulsford, Thames Park (RN walk) SU597828 (RS)

Juncaceae

***Juncus tenuis* - Slender Rush**
22/06/24 Bramshill Plantation, along path near pylons SU759616 (FB & RG)

Cyperaceae

***9. Eleogiton fluitans* - Floating Club-rush**
17/08/24 Fifty Acre Piece, Padworth Common (RN trip) SU631649 (AH)

Poaceae

***Deschampsia cespitosa* - Tufted Hair-grass**
09/08/24 Fobney Island SU70307112 (JL)

***Aira praecox* - Early Hair-grass**
18/05/24 Aldermaston Gravel Pits NE (RN trip) SU599668 (GS)

***Alopecurus myosuroides* - Black-grass**
07/05/24 Sulham Wood Meadows, Stoneham Farm SU649750 (JL)

CONTRIBUTORS

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Further abbreviations
BBOWT: Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust
HIWWT: Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust
NE: Natural England
NNR: National Nature Reserve
NT: National Trust
RN trip: seen during a RDNHS excursion
RN walk: seen during a RDNHS Wednesday walk

The Weather in Reading During 2024

by **Roger Brugge,** Department of Meteorology, University of Reading

Averages and anomalies mentioned in this report refer to the climatological period 1991-2020. Historical records date back to 1901 for rainfall, 1956 for sunshine and to 1908 for most other weather elements.

Despite the many fluctuations in temperature during the year, only the years of 2006, 2022 and 2023 have been milder overall than 2024. The rainfall total for the year was about a quarter more than normal, but 2024 was still slightly drier than 2023 which was also a very wet year. It was a relatively dull year, with only January, June and August being sunnier than normal. Overall, 2024 was the dullest year since 2000. 21 days with air frost was the fewest since 19 in 1990, while the 2 days with snow seen to fall was the fewest since just 1 day in 2014.

January

The wet weather which dominated December continued into January. On the 4th 25.2 mm of rain fell, the fourth heaviest January daily fall in the records to date and the wettest January day since 1939. This led to some localised flooding around the town. It was sunny and cold mid-month with the lowest daytime maximum and overnight minimum temperatures recorded during this time. After the wet start, the 19th was the fourteenth consecutive day without measurable rainfall – such a long spell is unusual in January. Overall rainfall and temperatures were near normal for January, and it was slightly sunnier than normal.

February

Rainfall for the 15 days ending on the 5th amounted to just 4.7 mm – this was the second dry spell lasting a fortnight this year so far, although total precipitation during February was to amount to almost two and a half times the normal amount due to other, very wet, days. On the 15th the minimum temperature recorded this morning was a high 11.4 °C, the warmest February night for 20 years. Since the year 2000, four February nights have failed to drop below 11.4 °C – there were no such February nights previously. Overall, it was the warmest February on record, with soil temperatures being unusually high as a result. It was also exceptionally wet – only the February months of 1951 and 2014 have been wetter in the station records.

March

March was another warmer-than-average month, but overall slightly cooler than February 2024. Precipitation amounted to twice the normal total for the month and the state of ground was frequently classified as 'wet'. Almost half the rain fell during the 26th-28th. Only two days had an air frost. The average soil temperatures at 30 cm and 100 cm were the highest on record at the present site, i.e. since before 1970. Interestingly, these temperatures in February were also the highest on record.

April

A depression moving northwards close to the Greenwich Meridian from the English Channel towards North Scotland late on the 27th and early on the 28th led to a spell of persistent rainfall in Reading; 26.2 mm fell (credited to the 27th), the third wettest April day so far in the record from 1908. There was no air frost during the month. The warmth of the period February to April helped to lift soil

temperatures to above the normal; the average April temperature even at a depth of 100 cm was the highest since before 1971, and at 30 cm it was the highest since 2011.

May

On the 5th the minimum temperature in the morning of 4.5 °C was the lowest air temperature this May. It was the third highest 'lowest minimum temperature' on record for May. 25.8 °C on the 12th made this one of the warmest days of 2024. The month was warmer and wetter than normal – the warmest May for six years and the wettest for three years. It was the fifth wettest spring (March to May) on record (2023 was the third wettest). Only the springs of 2007 and 2011 have been milder in the Reading record.

June

June was cooler than normal, but also the sunniest and the driest month of 2024. However, it was duller than in the June of 2022 and 2023. It was the driest June since 2018. The 18-day spell from 16 June to 3 July saw only 0.7 mm of rain falling, while the 3.6 mm that fell on the 15th made this the driest 'wettest day in June' since 1962 when the wettest day saw just 1.5 mm falling. The dry spell in the second half of the month coincided with the sunniest period of the month, but only after the 23rd did daytime temperatures rise above 25 °C.

July

July was a month of two halves. Overall, it was a cooler month than normal; it was also wetter and slightly duller than normal. Most of the rain (67.7 mm) fell from the 4th to the 16th, with only 1.2 mm in the final 16 days of the month with the final four days of the month being quite warm. The only heatwave of 2024 in Reading (defined as three or more consecutive days reaching 28 °C) occurred from 29th July to 1st August.

August

August was warmer than normal, with the highest temperature of the year occurring on the 12th. It was also drier and slightly sunnier than normal, being the driest August for eight years. The summer months (June to August) were cooler than normal – it was the coolest summer since 2001, which had the same average temperature.

September

September began with 29.1 °C on the 1st, followed by a mild night into the 2nd when the minimum temperature was 18.5 °C. It then turned cooler, particularly during daytime hours and ended up having near-normal temperatures for the month overall. The 22nd was the wettest day of September 2024 as 31.2 mm of rain fell in the 24 hours from 0900 GMT. This was one of three days to record over 20 mm of rainfall, helping to make this month the wettest September on record to date with a total fall of 156.9 mm. It was the wettest of any month since October 2020 (when 164.8 mm fell) and had 11 mm more precipitation than in 1974, the previous wettest September. There were 7 days when thunder was heard, the most in any month since the 11 thunder days which occurred in May 1969.

October

October was slightly warmer than normal, but was also wetter and duller than average. However, it turned drier in the final nine days with just 0.7 mm of rain falling in this period. Indeed, this dry spell lasted throughout the first half of November with just 0.2 mm falling then.

November

Overall, it was a rather dull November. Temperatures and rainfall ended up as average (after the dry start) with 6 nights having an air frost. After a dull start to the month, the sunniest day came as late as the 25th. The month had one day with some snowfall (on the 19th) – just one of two days in 2024 with any snowfall in Reading. Overall, it was the dullest autumn (September to November) on record and also the sixth wettest in the Reading record.

December

It was an unusually dull December – only that of 1956 has been duller. 21 days were without any bright sunshine – the most in any month apart from 22 in January 2013 and 24 in December 1956. Precipitation was about half the normal and there was only one night with an air frost (the 4th when -0.1 °C was recorded). No snowfalls occurred and the average temperature was almost 2 degrees C above normal.

Sunshine and Soil Temperatures 2024

	Total sunshine	Percentage of the Ave 1991-2020 sunshine	Greatest daily sunshine total	Date	Number of sunless days	Mean 10cm soil temperature	Mean 30cm soil temperature	Mean 100cm soil temperature
	h	%	h		days	°C	°C	°C
Jan	65.0	118	6.7	26	10	3.5	6.4	8.4
Feb	52.6	67	8.1	12	12	7.1	8.4	9.0
Mar	99.4	84	9.7	24	4	7.8	9.0	9.4
April	160.9	95	11.5	30	2	11.0	11.2	11.0
May	182.4	92	13.7	20	5	15.7	14.5	13.1
June	241.8	124	13.8	2	0	19.0	16.0	14.7
July	191.3	94	13.8	19	2	19.7	17.7	16.4
Aug	210.5	109	13.2	16	1	19.7	18.2	17.3
Sept	110.4	77	10.3	14	4	15.0	16.0	16.3
Oct	85.2	79	8.9	3	6	11.5	13.6	14.6
Nov	41.8	70	4.9	25	17	7.7	10.9	12.6
Dec	12.8	28	3.2	19	21	6.5	8.8	10.4
2024	***1454.1***	***93***	***13.8***	***Jun, Jul***	***84***	***12.0***	***12.6***	***12.8***

This report was compiled using the daily weather observations made at the University of Reading climatological station – most of these being made by our chief observers Cahyo Leksmono and Martin Lindupp. The University also operates an automatic weather station that gathers weather information continuously. Details can be seen at *https://research.reading.ac.uk/meteorology/atmospheric-observatory/atmospheric-observatory-data/* - there is even a mailing list that you can subscribe to in order to have daily weather reports sent direct to your inbox.

Wind details 2024

	Number of days with gale	Number of days with N'ly winds	Number of days with NE'ly winds	Number of days with E'ly winds	Number of days with SE'ly winds	Number of days with S'ly winds	Number of days with SW'ly winds	Number of days with W'ly winds	Number of days with NW'ly winds	Number of days with calm winds at 0900GMT
	days	days	days	days	days	days	days	days	days	days
Jan	0	2	6	1	1	4	8	8	0	1
Feb	0	0	1	5	0	4	11	7	1	0
Mar	0	1	1	8	1	7	10	2	0	1
April	0	4	2	1	1	3	7	5	7	0
May	0	3	4	5	5	1	5	4	3	1
June	0	3	3	2	0	0	7	11	4	0
July	0	1	1	4	2	3	7	9	3	1
Aug	0	2	2	3	2	3	9	10	0	0
Sept	0	2	6	5	1	0	7	3	6	0
Oct	0	1	3	5	6	2	5	7	0	2
Nov	0	5	5	5	0	1	4	5	1	4
Dec	0	2	3	0	1	2	10	10	0	3
2024	***0***	***26***	***37***	***44***	***20***	***30***	***90***	***81***	***25***	***13***

Precipitation and weather types 2024

	Total precipitation	Percentage of the average precipitation	Number days with 0.2mm or more	Number of days with 1.0mm or more	Greatest fall in 24 hours	Date	Number of days with air frost	Number of days with ground frost	Number of days with snow/sleet falling	Number of days with 50% ground snow cover at	Number of days with thunder	Number of days with ice pellets/small hail	Number of days with hail over 5mm diameter	Number of days with fog at 0900GMT
	mm	%	days	days	mm		days	days	days	days	days	days	days	days
Jan	65.8	102	10	8	25.2	4	9	16	1	0	0	0	0	0
Feb	109.1	242	20	16	21.7	8	3	6	0	0	0	0	0	2
Mar	81.6	202	19	15	14.9	26	2	8	0	0	1	0	0	2
April	64.4	133	15	13	26.2	27	0	6	0	0	0	0	1	0
May	73.6	169	16	15	15.5	22	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
June	11.2	24	7	4	3.6	15	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0
July	68.9	141	9	7	23.0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Aug	28.7	51	12	4	6.6	23	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Sept	156.9	316	21	14	31.2	22	0	5	0	0	7	0	0	1
Oct	66.8	91	18	12	14.4	18	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	2
Nov	72.5	100	9	7	20.7	23	6	11	1	0	0	0	0	1
Dec	37.2	57	18	10	6.4	4	1	10	0	0	0	0	0	1
2024	***836.7***	***128***	***174***	***125***	***31.2***	***Sep***	***21***	***79***	***2***	***0***	***10***	***0***	***1***	***9***

Temperature 2024

	Mean maximum temperature	Mean maximum anomaly	Mean minimum temperature	Mean minimum anomaly	Mean temperature	Mean temperature anomaly	Highest temp	Date	Lowest maximum temperature	Date	Highest minimum temperature	Date	Lowest temp	Date	Lowest grass min temperature	Date
	°C	degC	°C	degC	°C	degC	°C		°C		°C		°C		°C	
Jan	8.2	0.2	2.0	-0.1	5.1	+0.0	13.3	2	2.4	17	7.9	22	-6.1	18	-9.0	16
Feb	11.7	3.1	5.3	3.2	8.5	+3.2	16.8	15	6.2	7	11.4	15	-1.9	25	-5.7	24
Mar	12.6	1.4	5.1	1.6	8.9	+1.5	16.6	17	7.9	2	10.9	15	-1.9	3	-6.0	3
April	14.3	0.1	6.4	1.3	10.4	+0.7	20.0	12	9.1	22	12.3	6	0.8	25	-3.9	22
May	18.6	1.2	9.3	1.4	14.0	+1.3	25.8	12	12.9	3	12.8	14	4.5	5	-0.5	20
June	20.5	0.1	9.4	-1.4	15.0	-0.6	28.8	26	16.0	9	15.0	27	4.9	9	-4.0	9
July	22.3	-0.4	12.1	-0.8	17.2	-0.6	30.2	19	17.1	6	17.7	31	7.6	8	1.4	28
Aug	23.0	0.7	13.2	0.5	18.1	+0.6	31.1	12	18.8	24	17.3	9	8.5	30	1.0	17
Sept	19.0	-0.3	10.7	0.3	14.9	0.0	29.1	1	13.3	27	18.5	2	2.3	13	-3.8	13
Oct	15.7	0.6	8.2	0.3	12.0	+0.4	19.5	16	10.2	13	11.7	2	1.0	11	-3.1	4
Nov	10.8	-0.2	4.9	0.2	7.9	0.0	17.0	23	2.9	19	11.1	34	-2.4	28	-7.5	20
Dec	9.8	+1.4	4.8	+2.3	7.3	+1.9	14.4	1	6.2	27	11.4	1	-0.1	4	-7.3	20
2024	***15.5***	***+0.6***	***7.6***	***+0.7***	***11.6***	***+0.7***	***31.1***	***Aug***	***2.4***	***Jan***	***18.5***	***Sep***	***-6.1***	***Jan***	***-9.0***	***Jan***